

Guidelines for

Voluntary Local Reviews

VOLUME 2

**Towards a New Generation of VLRs:
Exploring the local-national link**



VOLUNTARY
LOCAL
REVIEWS

UN HABITAT
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UCLG
United Cities
and Local Governments

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Gaya Railway Station at Bihar in India

A train compartment which was already overcrowded but still passengers were trying to get in the train from the other side of the platform. It's a daily and very common practice in Bihar State in India. Lack of protection and security in every step in the journey can be seen.

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Foreword

One year after the publication of the first volume of the Guidelines for Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs), the VLR and Voluntary Subnational Review (VSR) global movement has grown exponentially, with at least 110 VLRs and 15 VSRs either already published and publicly available, or currently being drafted to be published in 2021 and 2022.

But the progress made through VLRs/VSRs is not only about increasing numbers, it is a story of transformation from the bottom up, of local innovation and of increased global dialogue. VLRs/VSRs have become established as one of the main tools for local and regional governments to monitor and report on SDG progress. Beyond their reporting role, VLRs/VSRs have proven to be powerful accelerators of the SDG localization process worldwide.

To capture this potential and build on our long-standing alliance to localize the SDGs, UN-Habitat and UCLG created the *VLR Series* to support the VLR/VSR global movement. The *VLR Series* aims to provide national, local and regional governments as well as communities with cutting-edge knowledge and best practices on SDG monitoring and reporting along with opportunities for exchange, peer learning and international engagement.

We are pleased to present this second volume of the Guidelines for VLRs, a critical piece of the *VLR Series* and an important step ahead for the research and dissemination of practices on multilevel coordination for SDG monitoring and reporting. This volume builds on the first volume published in 2020, and explores the link between VLRs and Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs), a

connection that remains largely preliminary and informal, but is essential for achieving the SDGs by 2030.

The guidelines demonstrate how VLRs and the global movement around them have revamped multi-level dialogue, increasing the demand for an effective multi-level cooperation and reinforcing the centrality and effectiveness of SDG localization. While much of the VLR-VNR link is still not fully institutionalized, a limited number of cases demonstrate effective approaches to connect the different dimensions of analysis of the guidelines.

This volume also showcases growing evidence of the impact of VLRs/VSRs on VNRs and the national monitoring process: local representatives have joined national delegations at the High Level Political Forum, while the 'local government sections' in VNRs are being co-produced between national and local governments. Taken together, the two volumes of the Guidelines (1) provide an overview of the VLR process; (2) demonstrate of how VLRs and VNRs can add value to one another; and (3) propose key recommendations on how to strengthen multilevel cooperation for data generation and management as well as for enhanced participatory process and means of implementation.

We hope that this volume will inspire and support both national and local governments throughout the world to strengthen their cooperation in jointly advancing the implementation of the SDGs. UCLG and UN-Habitat stand ready to respond to the needs and priorities of governments and partners worldwide to realise the global agendas, leaving no one and no place behind.



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1 Introduction: Contributing to a VNR-VLR ecosystem

When UN-Habitat and United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) published the first volume of the *Guidelines for Voluntary Local Reviews* (VLRs) in July 2020, both institutions had a clear goal in sight: the guidelines were designed to provide technical assistance to the local and regional governments (LRGs) that were approaching a local review of Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) localization in their territories and communities. The first volume presented the key concepts, potential components of a review's structure and outcomes, and a repository of examples and practices that could inspire even more local and regional governments to join this fledgling movement.

A few months later, in March 2021, while volume two of the guidelines was being developed, **the number of available VLRs had nearly doubled¹** from 37 local reviews to 65, with about 20 more municipalities and regional governments already working on their VLRs for 2021 and 2022. Moreover, new ways of reporting on SDG localization, such as Voluntary Subnational Reviews (VSRs), are beginning to emerge and consolidate themselves as valuable options for local and regional governments willing to take part in this process. More importantly, the political context that surrounded local and national reviews on SDG implementation had changed. **Local and regional governments in the vanguard of SDG implementation have been building a worldwide community** that has been looking for opportunities to work together and exchange knowledge and information. **National governments have started to see in local reviews a natural ally for their own implementation, monitoring and reporting efforts** — including policy alignment with the SDGs as well as their Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) — complementing the information they have with the unique data and evidence that

comes from local initiatives and mobilization. The policy innovation and trailblazing ideas that the SDGs have stimulated at the local level and that VLRs have collected can kindle an actual paradigm shift in national policy making too. Local governments reporting on localization, building on their communities' experiences and practices, involving their population in the achievement of the SDGs can become laboratories for policy change at all levels.

This is the rationale behind the second volume of the guidelines for VLRs: **exploring the relationship between national and local reviews, VNRs and VLRs, institutional creation and multi-level mechanisms for dialogue, collaboration and mutual learning**. Because of the progress in VLR participation and the emergence of a critical mass of local governments committed to SDG localization, national governments have access to an **unprecedented wealth of information** and an institutional channel that can ensure their policies get down to the level closest to the people and their communities. In the framework of an improved dialogue with national governments, local and regional governments have new opportunities to make an impact at higher levels of policy making, **catalysing the participation of even more local and regional authorities and stakeholders**. These guidelines are designed to guide both national and local governments that want to take this route of collaboration and mutual support. They explore how the national and local levels have worked together so far in SDG implementation and monitoring; what work is there still to be done; and what the VNR-VLR processes can teach us about the achievement of a fully multi-level, holistic and inclusive approach to the 2030 Agenda, the SDGs, and the sustainable future of our countries, communities and territories.

¹All recounts of VLRs available at any given time of the editorial process are always considered to the best of the editorial team's knowledge.

1.1 The *Guidelines for Voluntary Local Reviews* and the goal of Volume 2

The idea of volume one of the *Guidelines for Voluntary Local Reviews* developed throughout 2019 as a response to the growing interest of the sub-national governments² that joined UCLG's Community of Practice on VLRs — originally established at UCLG's 2019 World Congress in Durban, South Africa. These cities and regions were willing to contribute to the global monitoring process on the localization and implementation of the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda, and turned to the Community of Practice for common solutions to shared problems: How can a city or region report on implementation with the resources they have available? What data is needed to write a VLR? Ultimately, what is a VLR and how can one be made?

In order to provide this kind of guidance, Volume 1 analysed in detail the structure, content and methods of the 37 VLRs that had been published by June 2020³. It also attempted to categorize VLRs according to a few key variables that may help to identify general trends in local reporting: which local institutions or stakeholders drove the reporting effort; the relationship with national and global trends and strategies; common and unique elements in contents and structure; and the use and impact of data and indicators on the process and its outcomes.

Volume two of the guidelines, on the other hand, tries to bridge the gap between the efforts that are being made locally and the more encompassing localization and implementation strategies at the national level, and it does so by building on the contents of the 69 VLRs and the 250 VNRs that — at least to the best of the editorial

team's knowledge — were available by 31 March, 2021.

VLRs do not happen in a political vacuum. In most cases, local governments act in an institutional context in which their initiatives and policies coexist with national frameworks, regulations and strategic planning. National governments, moreover, have become increasingly aware of the untapped potential of implementation and monitoring capacity that sub-national governments can provide. National governments that fully embrace a 'whole-of-society' approach to the realization of the 2030 Agenda can play a fundamental role as drivers of policy innovation at the local level, and legitimize sub-national governments' initiatives, activities and mobilization as key parts of sustainability-driven progress that can sweep through all of society, communities and territories. The SDGs, since their establishment, have been a call for this kind of 'complementary' linkage across all levels of government. Their implementation is an important incentive to mobilize resources and participation, and VNRs and VLRs are, in turn, key incentives to perform, advocate for dialogue, and to start building policy in a new, holistic way.

For these reasons, volume two's main goal is to explore how the linkage between national and local levels is playing out: How are the two levels currently connected, both institutionally and strategically? What can be improved? What does multi-level collaboration require to be even more effective and to help all stakeholders contribute more and better to the localization of the SDGs?

²This report uses the concept of 'sub-national' government to refer to all levels of government below the national level: this concept, used here interchangeably with that of 'local government', includes the administrations of regions, districts, provinces, departments, metropolitan areas, municipalities, towns, cities, villages, communities, neighbourhoods and the rest of the vastly diverse terms and nomenclatures used to refer to all the instances of local government in various socio-political contexts around the world.

³UCLG and UN-Habitat (2020). *Guidelines for Voluntary Local Reviews. Vol. 1: A Comparative Analysis of Existing VLRs*, vol. 1, *Guidelines for VLRs* (Barcelona: UCLG and UN-Habitat) <https://unhabitat.org/guidance-for-voluntary-local-reviews-vol1-a-comparative-analysis-of-existing-vlrs>

The guidelines aim to have all institutional levels and stakeholders recognize themselves in such an ambitious perspective. It is important that the experiences, the evidence, the practices and the methods that are explored in this document resonate with what national and local governments expect from the implementation process: better and more effective shared environments and venues to design common solutions for common challenges. In order to achieve this goal, volume two collects information and knowledge across all regions to present examples, replicable ideas and all the guidance that national and local governments may require when approaching the task of measuring their performance and monitoring the localization of the 2030 Agenda.

The report explores the impact that VLRs have had, from the bottom up, on the institutional setting in which multi-level cooperation is happening. It explores the impact VLRs have had even on the way national governments are starting to make their VNRs – as the idea of reviewing as a shared task becomes more widespread. It also explores the national-local link and how important this has been to mainstream the SDGs across society and policy, to systematize data and indicators, and open the process of review to both social participation and the global ecosystem surrounding the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda.



1.2 The state of the art: how are VLRs doing?

Almost five years into the SDG era, at least 69 local reviews from 61 different local governments have been published⁴. Figure 1 provides an overview of the locations of these contributions (including all the VLRs published before 28 February, 2021) in a map. Annex 1, additionally,

updates the list of VLRs that was already featured in volume one, so that basic information about the currently published documents is available at a glance

Figure 1. Map of Voluntary Local Reviews, either available or planned to be published, on May 31, 2021.



To date, VLRs have been published in four continents and issued by all levels and types of sub-national governments. The Brazilian state of São Paulo, with a population of 45.5 million, issued a VLR in 2019⁵. The Japanese village of Shimokawa, on the island of Hokkaido, with an approximate population of 3,800, published its VLR in 2018⁶. Some have been a direct expression of the incumbent local administration's sustainable development strategy,⁷ others have been crowd sourced from the grassroots.⁸

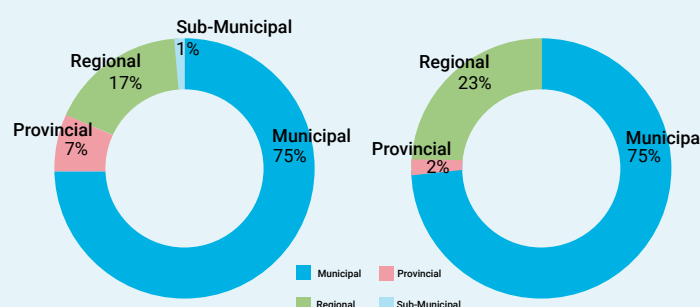
How fast is the movement growing?

Since the 2016 documents that are generally regarded as the earliest local reviews — i.e., reports from the regional governments of the Valencian Community and North Rhine-Westphalia — and since the inauguration of a more formal process with the presentation of the New York City VLR in 2018, the local review has risen to prominence as a fundamental cog in the machinery of global reporting. This process has not developed as one 'opposed' to the intergovernmental mechanisms led by the United Nations through the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF); on the contrary, it has grown to become an important complement to the work that national governments have been doing to monitor the achievement of the 2030 Agenda worldwide. VLRs have been

contributing first-hand information, knowledge on practices and experiences that would have otherwise gone undetected, recommendations and good practices on local development initiatives, bottom-up participation and review, localization of data and indicators, as well as a series of effective strategies to strengthen the bond between local communities and sustainability. They have also been a source of trust and co-ownership between local governments and their communities, constituencies and territory, which were engaged as peers in policy-making in order to make localization closer to their needs and a vehicle of actual local progress.

There is significant information that can be extracted from an analysis of the current VLR landscape and the participants in this growing movement (see Figure 3). Notably, the geographic distribution of the VLR as a mechanism to empower local governments' participation in SDG implementation and review is still moderately unbalanced, even though diversity remains important for the community of local and regional governments that have joined the process. Europe and Latin America account for well over a half of currently published documents. The VLR of the Chinese megalopolis of Guangzhou was published in late 2020. The city of Moscow plans to publish the first Eurasian VLR by mid-2021. Together, these two VLRs alone report on SDG localization initiatives and alignment affecting close to 25 million people.

Figure 2. Distribution of VLRs (percentage) by level of government for both available and planned VLRs (left, N=110), and published VLRs only (N=69).



Source: own elaboration

⁴Volume one of the guidelines provides a comprehensive definition of what are considered to be 'voluntary local reviews', i.e., any publication of local and regional governments that shared a few key 'common elements, particularly as regards their primary purpose: assessing and presenting advances on the fulfilment of the 2030 Agenda from a local standpoint and through a locally-developed narrative'. More details are available in 'Insight Box 1' of the report: UCLG and UN-Habitat, 1:11.

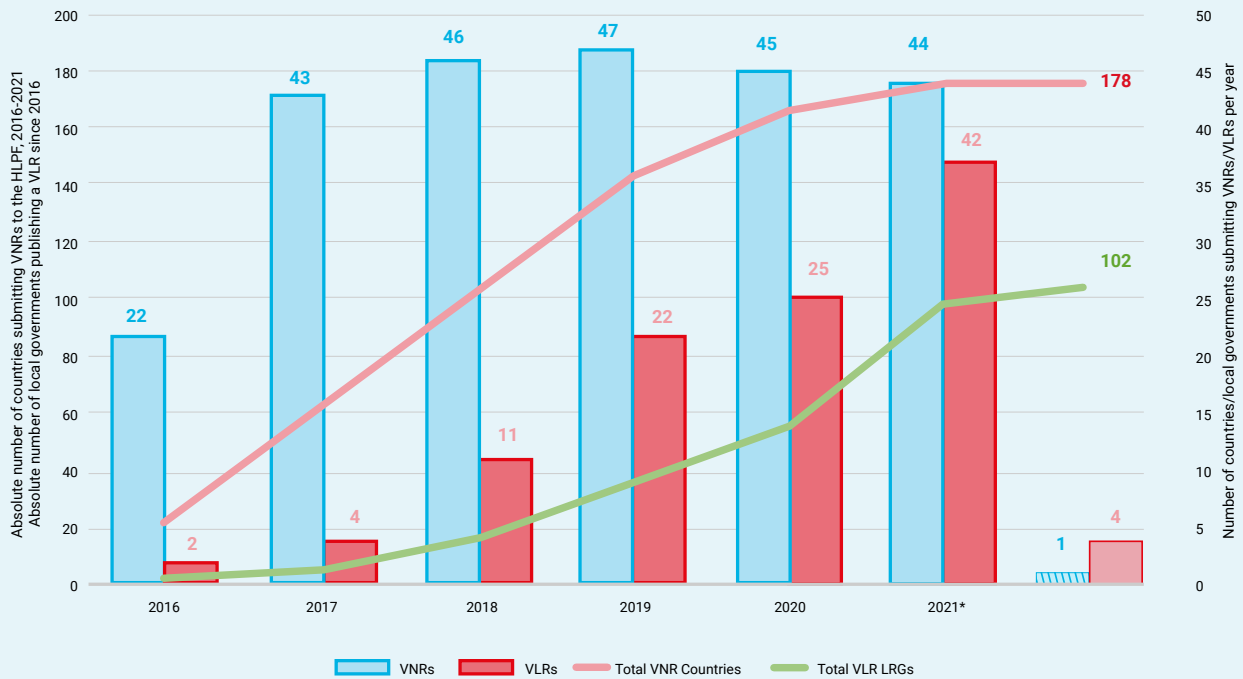
⁵Governo do Estado de São Paulo, SEADE, and FAPESP, 'ODS SP No PPA 2016-2019. 1º Relatório de Acompanhamento Dos Objetivos de Desenvolvimento Sustentável Do Estado de São Paulo' (São Paulo, 2019), <https://bit.ly/2SJ2rcq>.

⁶IGES and Town of Shimokawa, 'Shimokawa Town: The Sustainable Development Goals Report. The Shimokawa Challenge: Connecting People and Nature with the Future' (Shimokawa, 2018), <https://www.iges.or.jp/en/vlr/shimokawa>.

⁷New York City's local review, for example, stems directly from the city hall's strategy framework for sustainable development (OneNYC, available online at: <https://onenyc.cityofnewyork.us/>). See also New York's VLRs: NYC Mayor's Office for International Affairs, 'Voluntary Local Review. New York City's Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development' (New York, NY, 2018), <https://t.ly/koUe>; NYC Mayor's Office for International Affairs, 'Voluntary Local Review: Global Vision Urban Action. New York City's Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development' (New York, 2019), on.nyc.gov/2yDmr9t.

⁸The VLR of the state of Hawaii is often considered to be an outstanding example of a co-owned, participatory VLR because of the high mobilization for and social participation in the development of the review: a network of public and private institutions, civil society partners and grassroots associations. The Hawaii Green Growth Local2030 Hub has been leading local advocacy efforts towards the full alignment of state's strategy and policy with the SDGs and has also been in charge of the drafting of the VLR. The document is available online: Hawaii Green Growth Local2030 Hub, 'Aloha+ Challenge 2020 Benchmark Report. Hawaii's Voluntary Local Review of Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals' (Hawaii Green Growth, 2020), <https://is.gd/ZZHvzM>. Similarly, although in a completely different context, the local review of Canterbury (United Kingdom) was initially promoted and developed by a local forum of grassroots organizations and citizens' associations and supported by local government only at a later stage. See: Canterbury SDG Forum, 'Canterbury Sustainable Development Goal Forum: Initial Reports on Local Implementation of the Goals' (Canterbury, 2019), <https://t.ly/i1mz>.

Figure 3. Participation of national governments to the VNR process as related to the publication of VLRs by local and regional governments.



Source: own elaboration. Notes: data for 2022 include expected VLRs and countries that have officially committed to submit their VNRs.

The VLR phenomenon expanded significantly in 2020 and early 2021, especially when considering the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and the inevitable backlash on local political priorities and the withering resources available to even the most committed or aware of local governments. As is further detailed in the sections below, many international organizations and – more generally – the global ecosystem linked to the 2030 Agenda and sustainable development have expanded the ‘enabling environment’ for sub-national

governments engaged with the VLR process. New modes of local reporting on SDG implementation have also emerged, such as the Voluntary Subnational Reviews (VSRs). In several national contexts – and often thanks to the initiative of national local government associations (LGAs) – VSRs are collecting the contributions of various local governments, overcoming some of the technical difficulties involved in local reviews while fostering horizontal collaboration towards the common goal of achieving the SDGs at the local level as well.⁹

⁹LGAs have been active in several pilot countries to develop a comprehensive approach to SDG localization and gather information and data from all types of sub-national governments (regions, large and middle-size cities, towns and rural areas) within a national system, so as to collect and feed information to the VNR process. Six VSRs were published in 2020: Benin, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Kenya, Mozambique and Nepal. Eight more are being developed to be published in 2021, namely the VSRs of Cape Verde, Ecuador (the country's second sub-national review), Germany, Mexico, Norway, Sweden, Tunisia and Zimbabwe. More information on VSRs and their development: <https://tinyurl.com/y5rnho4c>.

¹⁰UCLG and Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments, ‘National and Sub-National Governments on the Way towards the Localization of the SDGs’, LRGs’ Report to the HLPF (Barcelona: UCLG and GTF, 2017), <https://is.gd/TNWgxX>; UCLG and Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments, ‘Towards the Localization of the SDGs’, LRGs’ Report to the HLPF (Barcelona: UCLG and GTF, 2018), <https://is.gd/XQrNs2>; UCLG and Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments, ‘Towards the Localization of the SDGs’, LRGs’ Report to the HLPF (Barcelona: UCLG and GTF, 2019), <https://is.gd/63rfxE>; UCLG and Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments, ‘Towards the Localization of the SDGs. How to Accelerate Transformative Actions in the Aftermath of the COVID-19 Outbreak’, LRGs’ Report to the HLPF (Barcelona: UCLG and GTF, 2020), <https://is.gd/CWleMW>. The complete series of UCLG’s HLPF reports is available online here: <https://gold.uclg.org/report/localizing-sdgs-boost-monitoring-reporting>.

1.3 Methodology

The guidelines base their analysis on a simple hypothesis: national and local reviewing processes complement each other much more than was previously thought.

The analysis builds on a qualitative assessment of currently available VLRs – and all the locally-based documents that perform a comparable function even without an ‘official’ VLR branding¹¹ issued at the local level (at least 69 documents from early 2016 to early 2021) – with an emphasis on key policy dimensions: SDG mainstreaming, data and indicators, social participation, means of implementation and the role of national LGAs and international organizations (see Section 3 and 4).

The assessment is supported by research conducted on primary sources through selected interviews with local government officials directly involved in the VLR process as well as representatives of national governments. On March 31, 2021, the author and the editors had been able to take part in (online) interviews with the following national and local institutions: the municipalities of Helsinki, Espoo, Turku, Oulu, Tampere and Vantaa as well as representatives of the Finnish Government and the Finnish LGA (*Kuntaliitto*); the government of Mexico City; the Norwegian LGA (*Kommunenes Sentralforbund*, KS); the city of Bogota and the National Planning Department (*Departamento Nacional de Planificación*, DNP) of the Colombian Government; the city of Buenos Aires; the authors of the VLR of the province of Jaén; the city of Bristol; the Municipality of São Paulo; the Municipality of

Bonn; the Municipality of Mannheim; representatives of Japan’s Institute for Global Environmental Strategies (IGES); the Spanish LGA (*Federación Española de Municipios y Provincias*, FEMP); the Urbanice programme of the Malaysian Government and the city of Shah Alam; Colombia’s civil society network ‘Cities How Are We Doing’ (*Red Ciudades Cómo Vamos*, RCCV); and Hawaii Green Growth Local2030 Hub, the editors of Hawaii’s VLR.

The outcome of this work and the combination of desk research and primary sourcing was validated through reviews by several offices and departments within the United Nations system, including the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), the United Nations Regional Economic Commissions, UCLG and several of the local government representatives that participated in bilateral interviews and meetings – among many other institutional and global partners.

Based on this research and analysis, this report argues that national governments can provide a safe institutional environment for local reviews to thrive, systematized information from a more encompassing perspective, and essential resources – such as comparable data – that would otherwise be unavailable to local governments alone; and that local governments can complement the information collected by national reviewing processes with community-driven examples, initiatives and information which would otherwise slip through the looser net of national monitoring.

¹¹ For a valuable working definition of what the guidelines refer to as a ‘VLR’ or a comparable local strategic document on implementation, please refer to Section 1.1 in Volume 1: UCLG and UN-Habitat, ‘Guidelines for Voluntary Local Reviews. Vol. 1: A Comparative Analysis of Existing VLRs’, 1:11.



2 Joining the dots: linkages between VNRs and VLRs

These guidelines explore the relationship between VNRs and VLRs: how do they mirror the values and ‘expectations’ of the institutions that draft them, as they approach the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda? These frameworks are not a simple or costless commitment; they are meant to be all-encompassing, holistic instruments for the achievement of a truly sustainable way of life that touches on various core aspects of our societies – hunger, poverty, education, health, the environment, urban settlements, decent work, safety and peace. The SDGs set objectives, timelines and arrangements bound to positively alter the lives of the citizens that are expected to comply with them and align their behaviour to such targets. A review of SDG implementation progress provides a snapshot of the functioning and the direction that either a country, a region or a city has taken. In other words, besides the presentation of a report as a formal fulfilment of a commitment, the reviews embody a statement about a community’s vision of its own sustainable future.

As the carriers of specific information from different levels of government, VNRs and VLRs are inherently complementary; however, their ability to merge constructively (i.e., to support each other as parts of a common

endeavour) is currently not a given. The degree to which national and local reviews acknowledge and align with each other is also a measure of the health of multi-level governance.

This section explores how VLRs, localization and, more generally, the growing self-awareness and organization of VLR local governments have driven institutional innovation or creation, improving the existing enabling environments and opening up new opportunities of multi-level collaboration. It also explores to what degree the local level, the localization of the SDGs and the untapped potential of local action are acknowledged in national reviews – with a specific focus on the reviews submitted by the countries whose cities and sub-national governments have gone on to present their own local reviews. This section finally approaches VLR local governments in the countries that committed to submit a VNR in 2021 to assess whether the local reviewing movement has had an impact on the national approach towards local implementation and on local governments’ involvement in national reviews.



2.1 Reviews as catalysts for multi-level governance and coordination

One of the aims of the growing international and institutional support to local reviews of SDG implementation is the establishment of a global community of like-minded sustainable development actors that both learn and grow by sharing their experience and knowledge, across borders as well as across the diversity of each context – be it political, cultural or administrative. The emergence of this horizontally tight community has also created virtuous circles within the countries of the cities and regions that issued their VLRs. Mobilization, networking and political momentum tend to have a snowball effect and engage more and more cities and territories; this in turn increases demand for more horizontal cooperation, exchange and dialogue, as well as vertical recognition and more direct access to the national enabling environment for monitoring and reviewing implementation. As this push for institutional dialogue and collaboration grows, the middle ground – i.e., the political space in which different levels of government converge in search of information, support and leverage – can be full or empty, rigidly structured or loosely informal. Ultimately, the growing awareness of the VLR cities and regions has increased the need for more mechanisms of multi-level collaboration. Reviews – either at local or national level, or at both – have become a vehicle for institutional innovation or creation and an incentive to provide new ways and opportunities to mediate between the national and local agendas. In several countries, this phenomenon has been particularly significant.

Multi-level dialogue in Latin America: Mexico, Argentina, Colombia and Brazil

Mexico is one of the countries that volunteered to submit a VNR to the HLPF in 2021

– specifically, its third VNR following those of 2016 and 2018. The country's SDG-driven enabling environment, therefore, has been particularly animated. Multi-level interactions and dialogue on the 2030 Agenda in Mexico have been constructively fluid. Federated states and municipalities were traditionally invited to and involved in technical workshops and awareness-raising events organized by federal institutions.

In terms of more bottom-up initiatives and leadership, on the other hand, international organizations and development cooperation actors have also played a meaningful role in occupying this space of intermediation and cross-level coordination. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit* (GIZ), for instance, have provided technical and institutional assistance to many SDG-related activities at the local level. For example, GIZ supported the capacity-building and awareness-raising initiatives within the public administration of the federated state of Oaxaca, which eventually led to the creation of the state's VLR. Since February 2018, a consortium of the Presidency's Office, the National Conference of State Governors (*Conferencia Nacional de Gobernadores*, CONAGO), UNDP and GIZ has led a series of capacity-building events that aim to bring together civil servants from all federated authorities and the national government to train for monitoring and reporting on the 2030 Agenda and its implementation in all branches of local government.¹² The federal government, the national LGAs, UCLG and GIZ are also working together on Mexico's VSR, whose contents are expected to contribute directly to the country's VNR to be presented at the HLPF in 2021.

¹² More information on the on-going series of capacity-building workshops is available online on the initiative's website: <https://iniciativaagenda2030.wixsite.com/agenda2030-mx> (in Spanish).

The city of Buenos Aires has also been on the forefront of SDG localization. It has undergone an extensive internal transformation to align the plans and programmes of its departments to the requirements and objectives of the 2030 Agenda framework.¹³ It was one of the first movers in Latin America and, more broadly, among large global cities to join the VLR movement with a 2019 review that became a paragon of compliance with the UNDESA guidelines and an update,¹⁴ in 2020, which set an almost unmatched example of methodological rigour in the treatment of data and indicators.¹⁵ It has done so in a country-wide context which has also been quite supportive: the *provincia*¹⁶ of Santa Fe too published a VLR in 2019, Córdoba is currently preparing a report with support from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and, at the national level, the Government of Argentina submitted a VNR to the HLPF twice, in 2017 and in 2020.

The balance between the two levels of reporting revolves around one specific focal point of the federal institutional system: the National Council for Social Policy Coordination (CNCPS, *Consejo Nacional de Coordinación de Políticas Sociales*).¹⁷ Since 2016, the CNCPS has taken over the whole SDGs and 2030 Agenda portfolio on behalf of the federal government, and has provided a hub for the exchange of information, good practices and strategic planning on SDG localization among Argentinian local governments. In 2016, the council edited a 'federal guide' to local implementation, which was also used by Buenos Aires in its first VLR for the identification of certain indicators and the definition of sectorial policy 'bundles' to better structure its review. In 2018, it established a 'Federal SDG Network for Provincial Governments' involving all 24 *provincias* with regular meetings — including Buenos Aires, whose status is a hybrid between the regional and municipal levels.¹⁸ Finally, the CNCSP also set up the 1st International Peer-Training Meeting for the Implementation of the 2030

Agenda in Federal Countries,¹⁹ with the support of UNDP, GIZ and other international partners, and the participation of several *provincias* and regional governments from other countries, including Yucatán, a Mexican federated state that also published its own VLR in 2020.²⁰

Buenos Aires itself, which ultimately enjoys a level of political leverage and policy resources that are not available to most other Argentinian regions, has recently stepped up to partially fill the institutional vacuum that is affecting horizontal coordination among the country's sub-national governments. It has established informal relations with other Argentinian cities to provide expertise on local reporting, it has sought connections with other municipalities abroad, and it has been working on a capacity-building platform on SDG localization for local and regional governments.

A few institutions at the national level in Colombia — such as the National Planning Department (DNP, *Departamento Nacional de Planeación*) or the National Statistics Bureau (DANE, *Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística*) — have been specifically relevant in the country's SDG-related processes. The DNP has been in charge of Colombia's three VNRs (2016, 2018 and 2021) and it is from this established expertise on the monitoring process that it has also been consulted in Bogota's preparation of its own VLR. In an interview conducted in the build-up of the guidelines, representatives from Bogota's city hall discussed the process of information and data collection for the local review, which is expected to be ready by 2022. Interested stakeholders, organized groups and community representatives from both civil society and the private sector were approached in the preparation of the draft. Bogota was a first initiator in establishing contact with the DNP, which was considered to be a key partner because of the experience it accumulated with the national process. When city hall approached the Ministry of Fo-

¹³The author and the editors had an opportunity to discuss these topics with two representatives of the General and International Affairs Secretariat of Buenos Aires' city hall in a round of interviews carried out in January 2021.

¹⁴City of Buenos Aires, 'Voluntary Local Review. Building a Sustainable and Inclusive Buenos Aires', ed. David Groisman et al. (Buenos Aires, 2019), <https://t.ly/zAQP>.

¹⁵City of Buenos Aires, 'Voluntary Local Review. Buenos Aires Adaptation of the 2030 Agenda', ed. Angeles Arano et al. (Buenos Aires: Buenos Aires Ciudad, 2020).

¹⁶Argentina's *provincias* are first-tier sub-national governments, i.e., the level generally referred to as 'regional' in most contexts. *Departamentos* are the second-tier Argentinian administrative division, i.e., the 'provincial' level.

¹⁷See also: <https://www.argentina.gob.ar/politicassociales> (in Spanish).

¹⁸Reporting materials are available online: <https://www.argentina.gob.ar/politicassociales/ods/subnacional>.

¹⁹For more information, see also: <https://www.argentina.gob.ar/noticias/primer-encuentro-internacional-de-aprendizaje-entre-pares-para-la-implementacion-de-la> (in Spanish).

²⁰Government of the State of Yucatán, 'Voluntary Subnational Report. Yucatán 2020' (Mérida: Gobierno Estatal de Yucatán, 2020), <https://is.gd/VDeAzk>.

reign Affairs and the DNP for support for its plan to produce a global-level review of their work on localization — in order to locate Bogotá on the monitoring map as much as Colombia's VNRs had done for the national level — there was no formal mechanism for this kind of multi-level dialogue. The DNP had, in fact, laid the groundwork for this kind of institutional upgrade. The national Strategic Framework for SDG Implementation in Colombia,²¹ published in 2018, was extremely aware of the potential contribution of local and regional governments to implementation and, in fact, committed to localization as part of the national approach to the 2030 Agenda. “Even though the SDGs do refer to global goals, their achievement rests on the ability to turn them into reality in cities, regions and towns. This is the scale at which goals and targets, means of implementation must be defined, as well as the use of indicators to define baselines for monitoring progress”.²² This vision of and commitment to localization became a hallmark of the DNP's approach to the SDGs: it studies the organization of multi-level governance in the Colombian institutional ecosystem; it set up technical training ‘tours’ to foster the alignment of local sustainable development plans with both the SDGs and the national development plans, through what the DNP defined as a “pedagogy of the SDGs”;²³ and it played a fundamental role in the standardization of the data management and indicator guidelines to enable a more measurement-driven approach at the local level (see more information in Section 3.2), even though a truly standardized and locally-disaggregated indicator toolkit for local governments is not available yet. Ultimately, it supported — well in advance, if compared to similar initiatives in other countries — the alignment of local development plans with the 2030 Agenda, so as to “determine whether the territories have managed to gain ownership of the SDGs”.²⁴

Finally, Brazil has been an interesting case of evolving multi-level mechanisms as well, even though some of its features are unique,

to the extent that part of the multi-level dynamics have played out between the municipal and state level, i.e., between two subnational tiers, with limited participation by the national government. Brazil published a VNR in 2017 and has a higher number of published VLRs than any other country, with seven local reviews to date.²⁵ Since 2018, a national law has defined the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda as a technical baseline for policy-making, and a very large horizontal movement has organized, albeit informally, to promote the alignment of local authorities' sustainable development plans and strategies with the SDGs. The country's mobilization around the SDGs — in particular through national LGAs (e.g., the National Confederation of Municipalities, CNM, and the *Frente Nacional de Prefeitos*) and international partners such as UNDP — created a valuable enabling environment for local governments to act. In the specific case of the area of São Paulo, the emergence of the VLRs meant more policy awareness of the SDGs and the opportunities they bring for local governments. This case is particularly relevant for several reasons. The municipality is one of the largest and most dynamic megacities in the world, the largest of the Americas; its metropolitan area is the most productive economic engine of the country, and a political behemoth in the continental balance. The policy alignment of the city proper alone to the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda would already affect the lives of about 12 million people. The VLR that the city published in 2020 provides a glimpse of the inherent socio-economic, administrative and cultural complexity of a global city that undertakes a process of systematic alignment with the 2030 Agenda framework. At least one municipality in the larger São Paulo metro area, Santana de Parnaíba, has already published a VLR. At least two more municipalities in the area — Guarulhos (1.5 million inhabitants) and São Bernardo do Campo (845,000 inhabitants) — and another metropolis in the São Paulo state (Campinas, 1.2 million inhabitants proper, and a metro area of about 3.5 million people) are already wor-

²¹CONPES, ‘Estrategia Para La Implementación de Los Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible (ODS) En Colombia’, Documento CONPES (Bogotá: Consejo Nacional de Política Económica y Social, 2018), <https://colaboracion.dnp.gov.co/CDT/Conpes/Economicos/3918.pdf>.

²²CONPES, 43.

²³CONPES, 43.

²⁴CONPES, 44.

²⁵The Brazilian ‘cluster’ includes, to date, five municipalities (São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Niterói, Santana de Parnaíba and Barcarena) and two federated states (São Paulo and Pará). The references to the reviews are as follows: São Paulo City Hall, ‘Report of Localization of Sustainable Development Goals in São Paulo’ (São Paulo: Cidade de São Paulo, 2020); Governo do Estado de São Paulo, SEADE, and FAPESP, ‘ODS SP No PPA 2016-2019. 1° Relatório de Acompanhamento Dos Objetivos de Desenvolvimento Sustentável Do Estado de São Paulo’; Rio de Janeiro City Hall and UN-Habitat, ‘Relatório de Progresso Dos Objetivos de Desenvolvimento Sustentável Do Município de Rio de Janeiro’, ed. Daniel Mancebo et al. (Rio de Janeiro: Prefeitura da Cidade do Rio de Janeiro and UN-Habitat, 2020), <https://is.gd/6pJ6sf>; Simone Gatti, ‘Voluntary Local Report on Sustainable Development Goals: Niterói’, ed. Marília Ortiz et al. (Niterói: UN-Habitat and Niterói City Hall, 2020), <https://unhabitat.org/voluntary-local-report-niteroi-brazil>; Grupo de Trabalho de ODS da Prefeitura de Santana de Parnaíba, ‘Santana de Parnaíba Conectada Ao Futuro. Objetivos de Desenvolvimento Sustentável’, ed. Cíntia Marcucci and Juliana Marques (Santana de Parnaíba, 2018), <https://bit.ly/3cfW4VE>; Prefeitura de Barcarena, ‘Localização Da Agenda 2030’, ed. Patrícia M. Menezes (Barcarena, Pará, 2017), <https://bit.ly/2WyDXUo>.

king on their own local reviews. The state of São Paulo itself published a VLR in 2019.

While the policy environment and political space in which this relationship has played out has been largely unstructured and uncoordinated at least until 2018, since the beginning of its process of alignment the municipality of São Paulo has adopted a 'vision' of localization that aimed to – internally – integrate the work of as many offices and departments as possible and – externally – devote its localization strategy to the production of knowledge, best practices, technical and methodological resources and expertise for as many cities as possible to replicate and adapt to their own context. In 2019, the municipality of São Paulo created an SDG-related committee which included civil servants from several departments of city hall as well as representatives of civil society, the academia and the private sector. This body also set in motion weekly online meetings to

establish a set of localized indicators (see also Section 3.2 below) with the engagement of over 120 representatives. This task was also a new opportunity to engage in even more dialogue for technical cooperation and exchange with a similar committee that was already active within the state government. This common ground has also fed the idea of more horizontal cooperation throughout the country, so as to mobilize even more municipalities and pool all the technical resources and expertise that were developed in the Paulista context of localization. While these connections among municipalities and across levels are largely informal, the number of Brazilian VLRs are a testament to the strong and diffuse commitment of Brazilian local governments to the SDGs and their implementation at the local level – and hopefully a catalyst for further local participation and the consolidation of an interconnected 'cluster' (in Brazil and beyond) of reporting cities and local governments.

¹⁹ The contents of this Insight Box were kindly contributed by the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA).

INSIGHT BOX 1 Prospects for SDG local reviews and the national-local link in Africa.²⁶

To accelerate implementation, scale and pace of the 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063, Africa's Blueprint for Sustainable Development, the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) is providing technical support to subnational authorities to conduct VLRs. To date, UNECA has supported VLR processes in five cities and localities: Accra (Ghana), Harare (Zimbabwe), Yaoundé (Cameroon), Ngora District (Uganda) and Victoria Falls (Zimbabwe). The findings of the five VLRs were presented during the 2020 Africa Regional Forum for Sustainable Development, which took place in Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe. As a response to a specific request from Member States, and in an effort to scale up the VLR effort, the UNECA is drafting an Africa VLR guideline and template to support the preparation of VLRs in the region.

Despite social, economic and political diversity, the region is united by common trends and dynamics. Most of Africa's population still resides in rural areas as most of the continent's urbanization has yet to take place. As

subnational governments are at the forefront of service delivery, local leadership plays a critical role in ushering the implementation of the SDGs and Agenda 2063. This reality is met with vast challenges and great opportunities. The SDGs and regional frameworks, including Agenda 2063, the African Common Position on Habitat III and the Harmonized Regional Framework for the New Urban Agenda, provide opportunities to ensure sustainable development for the continent.

VLR preparation in the region reveals that SDGs have been mainstreamed to some extent in local development plans, but there is limited coordination between local and national processes as well as challenges in designing multi-sectoral initiatives that engage diverse stakeholders at the local level. Localities have either updated or are in the process of updating their work plans and budgets to align with the two agendas, but the VLR process has revealed gaps in coordination by demonstrating how sustainability targets and goals are weakly tied to interventions at the local level.

African VLRs highlight the need for inclusivity and the involvement of major groups and other stakeholders such as women, youth and civil society organizations to help identify gaps in implementation. Involving broad stakeholders has demonstrated how activities are already linked to the two agendas and whether opportunities exist to connect with on-going city programmes or private initiatives. With millions of people living in poverty in the region, the lens of “Leave No One Behind” is especially relevant for success and VLRs are serving as a vehicle to present the needs of minorities and vulnerable groups. As a tool, VLRs have also been widely recognized as being useful in COVID recovery as they can provide critical information on the depth of inequality resulting from the pandemic.

The lack of disaggregated data and localized indicators remains an enormous challenge, making VLRs difficult to conduct. In some localities, national statistics offices have supported VLRs by providing localized indicators for monitoring and reporting. Such support has led to rich analyses, and further assistance from NSOs would be beneficial to strengthen the capacity of local data collection systems.

Furthermore, many localities in the region lack financial, technical and human resources to start the SDG localization process. To create such enabling environments for subnational governments to deliver on their mandate, VLR production underlines the importance of peer

review mechanisms to support implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the SDGs and Agenda 2063. Exchanging best practices and lessons is instrumental not only when the review process is finalized but also at every stage of the VLR preparatory process. To increase resources, VLRs from the region stress the need to engage the private sector and other partners.

VLR processes in the region also reveal how national coordination structures aid the preparation of local reviews. Linking national SDG mechanisms with VLRs helps improve monitoring and coherence in implementation between the national and local. In countries where such structures did not exist, the VLR process has spurred their creation. National VNR mechanisms also serve as key entry points for connecting national and local reviews and supporting the scaling-up of VLRs country wide.

Examples in Africa highlight the role of political leadership to institutionalize VLRs and the need for VNR and VLR processes to support the preparation and scaling up of local frameworks for sustainable development in the region. Stronger VNR-VLR linkages help align resources to local level initiatives and ensure greater symbiosis between local and national development planning, reinforcing coordination at all levels and accelerating the implementation of global and regional agendas.

Progress in multi-level dialogue in Asia-Pacific: the case of Malaysia

The Malaysian Government is presenting its second VNR to the HLPF in 2021, but the country's underpinning sustainable development environment has been actively engaged at the local, national and international levels for several years. Malaysia's first VNR in 2017 did not mention SDG 11 and limited its review of sub-national performance to the collection of relevant data sourced at the local level. The connection between Malaysian municipalities and the SDGs, in fact, was kindled when Kuala Lumpur, the capital city, hosted the ninth edition of the World Urban Forum in 2018. Malaysia saw an the oppor-

tunity to re-frame its SDG implementation strategy by investing more in SDG localization and the active contribution of municipalities and federated states. While the process is still substantially top-down, the Malaysian Government seeks to capitalize on local knowledge and initiatives to turn localization into a driver of better performance in SDG implementation nation-wide.²⁷

The Ministry of Housing and Local Government (*Kementerian Perumahan dan Kerajaan Tempatan*, KPKT) has largely been in charge of this relationship and approach to the SDGs. In terms of engagement, the KPKT encountered a few difficulties mobilizing local governments because of the long-standing understanding of the 2030 Agenda as a glo-

²⁷ This section is based on an interview (February 2021) between the author and the editors and representatives from the Urbanice Centre within the Ministry of Housing and Local Governments and the municipality of Shah Alam.

bal framework with little to no repercussions on the daily administration and humdrum of the municipalities and their communities. The ministry, therefore, is still largely committed to awareness-raising activities on this matter, including the development of tailored grants to incentivize participation. The KPKT is coordinating these actions through Urbanice Malaysia, a Centre of Excellence for Sustainable Cities and Community Wellbeing, a company established within the KPKT. In terms of agency, some Malaysian cities have, in fact, answered to these calls and have become front-runners in the national context.

Several municipalities followed the VLR movement since the earliest developments and noticed that the information, policy initiatives, administrative expertise and data management that most VLRs included were actually already available to Malaysian sub-national governments. This, too, worked as an incentive and several municipalities have joined the Malaysia SDG Cities programme which, under Urbanice's guidance, provides expertise and technical and institutional support to cities interested in establishing their own sustainable development local strategy and action plan. The programme's "3 + 1 Step" method invites participating municipalities to consider a fully-fledged VLR as the final step of their involvement in the process. In February 2021, when the guidelines were edited, the cities of Shah Alam and Subang Jaya were already working on their VLRs and were more recently joined by Kuala Lumpur. Through the initiatives of Urbanice, the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) has also provided financial and technical assistance to the VLR process of Subang Jaya since November 2020.

The relevance of the work of the VLR cities, under the guidance of Urbanice, has been

acknowledged by both the national government and the cities invited to take part in the VNR process. Under the coordination of the Malaysia United Nations Resident Coordinator's Office (UNRCO) and with the key support of UN-Habitat and Urbanice Malaysia, the Malaysian VLR cities have been invited to contribute to the VNR process by preparing a policy paper on their activities and priorities, presenting them at the Technical Working Groups that are coordinating the stakeholders' inputs to the VNR. This process led to the inclusion of a VLR box within Malaysia VNR to be presented at the 2021 edition of HLPF.

Malaysia's national statistics office has worked significantly on the adaptation of the Inter-agency and Expert Group on SDG Indicators' (IAEG-SDGs) framework to the national specificities of the country, and it has been working with local focal points to improve its localization. Several NGOs active in Malaysia have played a meaningful role in terms of awareness-raising and grassroots mobilization, especially on specific issues connected to specific SDGs: gender equality, discrimination, climate change and its impact on the development of new modes of production. Their activity at the community level has generated policies, initiatives and data which have been useful for local reporting and strategic planning thanks to a fluid ecosystem of mutual assistance and dialogue. This ecosystem is still largely informal, however, and this is hindering an effective mapping of all the stakeholders and institutions that are contributing to SDG localization. A proposal for a nation-wide SDG steering committee to include not only the KPKT, but also the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the national statistics office and several budget-related institutions is still at a very early stage.



Multi-level relationships in Europe: United Kingdom, Finland and Germany

In the case of Bristol, the outstanding inclusiveness of its multi-stakeholder approach to SDG localization and the rigorous technical effort that the city put into its VLR were also a testament to a fledgling and yet largely supportive enabling environment that has been brewing in the British context for years. Even though — as of early 2021 — only three cities (Bristol, Canterbury and Liverpool) have published a local review, the United Kingdom has experienced a collaborative flow both among local governments and in the vertical relationship between the national government and local authorities. The national government was particularly attentive to the information and practices that could be shared from the local level when it prepared its 2019 VNR (more details are discussed in Section 2.2) and overtly engaged Bristol and other cities in the consultation process that led to the final document. Bristol is part of Core Cities UK,²⁸ a group which gathers 11 large municipalities and coordinates advocacy and initiatives for urban development, sustainability and liveability. More generally, the kind of grassroots activism and widespread adhesion to the core values of the SDGs has been growing in the United Kingdom's communities and territories, from larger metropolitan areas like Manchester, Liverpool and Bristol itself to Scotland, the Midlands and Northern England.

Many British local authorities came together within the national Local Government Association (UK-LGA)²⁹ to support a motion promoting systemic alignment of local policy-making with the SDGs — a strategic approach considered the next step after

about 300 British local authorities had officially declared a climate emergency. In July 2020, UK-LGA, together with the UK Stakeholders for Sustainable Development network (UKSSD), issued a handbook on the SDGs to raise awareness on alignment and implementation across local government in the country and is already planning a series of webinars to increase peer-to-peer training opportunities.³⁰

Against this background, however, these positive conditions for SDG-driven collaboration have remained largely informal, cities and other local authorities have been active in dialogue and the exchange of information and methods, but have also focused on cooperation with other local governments outside of Great Britain and have lamented the lack of an 'engine' of horizontal collaboration. There has been advocacy for a national 'SDG champion' to lead the movement of localizing cities; the Office for National Statistics (ONS) has been surging as a cooperation catalyst thanks to the attention it paid to SDG-related data and indicators; and UK-LGA itself has risen as a potential space for more formal, institutional collaboration among local governments. In the meantime, Bristol has published its own VLR handbook to offer technical and political guidance to other local governments willing to join the movement.³¹ It is coordinating a shift towards culture as the core topic of SDG-related campaigning and advocacy work for the second half of 2021, setting its sight on the COP 26 Conference in Glasgow as a global platform for further engagement. Bristol continues to embody a whole-of-society approach that — besides informing its VLR — is also growing into a call for more action and dialogue among the United Kingdom's local governments, stakeholders and grassroots throughout the Decade of Action.

²⁸ See also: <https://www.corecities.com/>.

²⁹ More information available online: <http://local.gov.uk>.

³⁰ Local Government Association, 'UN Sustainable Development Goals: A Guide for Councils' (London: United Kingdom Local Government Association, 2020), <https://is.gd/4ef5G1>.

³¹ Sean Fox and Allan Macleod, 'Voluntary Local Reviews: A Handbook for UK Cities' (Bristol, 2019), <https://www.bristol.ac.uk/media-library/sites/cabot-institute-2018/documents/uk-cities-voluntary-local-review-handbook.pdf>.

LIVE LABORATORY BOX 1.***Local reviews and SDG localization in Finland: a VLR live laboratory***

At the end of January 2021, the team that edited the Guidelines had an opportunity to (virtually) sit down with the representatives of Finland's national government, the Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities (AFLRA), and the six Finnish cities that either have already published their first VLR or are in the process of drafting one: Helsinki, Espoo, Turku, Oulu, Tampere and Vantaa. Helsinki released its second VLR in May 2021 and plans to launch it internationally at the 2021 HLPF. It was an idea for collaboration that came up while trying to answer the question of how the multi-level relationship on SDG implementation monitoring and review was working, especially in a country that had just published a VNR in 2020 and where three cities had already issued a VLR by the end of that year. Because of that event, the editing team was able to have a unique vantage point on how this relationship was growing through the various stages of a process which was inclusive but diverse: the group put together national and local representatives; urban municipalities and more

rural communities; the country's capital and cities within its metropolitan area; and an association of local governments with an agenda closely linked to that of smaller, more rural towns and municipalities. The variety of approaches to local reviews that emerged in the Finnish case led to the idea of a living laboratory that followed the process as it developed: from the one front-runner through the national perspective, the new contributors, and those local authorities still in a planning or drafting phase.

The Finnish case was all the more interesting because of its unique approach to collaboration and mutual institutional support, since the national government and the departments within the Prime Minister's Office in charge of the VNR process also worked as enablers and brokers of contact among different levels of government. Since the country's first VNR in 2016, the national government has acknowledged how relevant the mobilization and experiences of local governments can be when it comes to defining a

multi-level approach to SDG implementation and localization.

At the local level, the Finnish cities have been keen on multi-level collaboration and the exchange of information and practices since the onset of the process. Helsinki, which published its first VLR in 2019 and a new review in May 2021, played an important role of intermediation between the national and local levels: on the one hand, it was institutionally linked to the national government via its mayorship (the current Mayor of Helsinki had previously been Minister of Economic Affairs and Minister of Housing in the national government); on the other hand, it used its experience with the VLR as a catalyst for more participation, fostering the exchange of the good and bad practices it had learnt and 'leading by example' the creation of the Finnish community of VLR municipalities as they decided to come together and share the opportunities and challenges of the process.

The emergence of several VLRs in Germany had a relevant impact on the country's enabling environment for localization, but still in an informal and less institutionalized way. The sustainable development ecosystem at the federal level had maintained fertile ground for the mobilization and participation of local and regional governments – the German Council for Sustainable Development, for instance, has facilitated dialogue and cooperation since 2010 among German municipalities through the 'mayors' dialogue on the sustainable municipality', an initiative which worked as a horizontal hub for collaboration and exchange as well as an impulse for key policy recommendations on sustainable cities and urban development, designed at the local level and addressed to national policy-makers. Sub-national governments have also been involved in the Inter-Ministerial Working group on Sustainable Urban Development (*IMA-Stadt*), overtly supportive of 'whole-of-government' approaches to sustainability planning and policy.

There is yet no formal mechanism of collaboration for German municipalities to engage in technical mutual support, peer-to-peer learning or capacity-building, or for VLRs to become an institutionalized 'rite of passage' for sustainable, development-oriented local governments – even though national LGAs have taken up several initiatives since the inception of the SDG-era. In 2017, the national association of municipalities, DST (*Deutscher Städtetag*) initiated the 'SDG-Indikatoren für Kommunen' project,³² with the support of the Bertelsmann Foundation and in partnership with seven more German federal and local institutions working with local governments and LGAs, providing technical assistance on data collection, monitoring and reporting to several German municipalities. The DST has also begun working on the development of a Voluntary Local Government Report on SDG

localization, with methods and scope similar to those of the VSRs that have already been published around the world.

The Service Agency 'Communities in One World' (*Servicestelle Kommunen in einer Welt*, SKEW), established within the non-profit organization Engagement Global – Agency for Development Initiatives (*Service für Entwicklungsinitiativen*) and on behalf of the German Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, has also been crucial in the empowerment of German communities and their initiatives for and commitment to sustainable development and international cooperation. The agency has been assisting local and municipal SDG localization efforts for years and has developed an 'SDG Toolbox' that includes an SDG Dashboard, with user-friendly tools for SDG implementation self-assessments, and a set of communication and advocacy resources.³³ Since 2014, moreover, a joint venture between DST, GIZ and Engagement Global has been supporting Connective Cities,³⁴ an international community of practice for sustainable urban development which has engaged almost 3,000 municipal actors from about 500 cities in 66 countries across Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America and the Middle East. Finally, the SKEW has also cooperated with the DST and the German section of CEMR-CCRE to develop a Specimen Resolution 'The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development: Building Sustainability at the Local Level',³⁵ a common declaration which over 150 German municipalities have already signed as an acknowledgement of the relevance of the SDGs for local governments and a commitment to their localization in their communities and territories.

German VLRs thrived in a context in which local sustainability strategies were a very common tool of urban and territorial planning. These strategies evolved into 2030

³² Dirk Assmann et al., 'SDG-Indikatoren für Kommunen. Indikatoren Zur Abbildung Der Sustainable Development Goals Der Vereinten Nationen in Deutschen Kommunen' (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Stiftung, Bundesinstitut für Bau-, Stadt- und Raumforschung Deutscher Landkreistag, Deutscher Städtetag, Deutscher Städte- und Gemeindebund, Deutsches Institut für Urbanistik, and Engagement Global, 2018), <https://is.gd/kX2dpy>. For more information: <https://is.gd/dULsKO> [in German].

³³The SKEW toolbox is available online at this link: <https://skew.engagement-global.de/sdg-werkzeugkasten.html> [in German].

³⁴More information available online: <https://www.connective-cities.net/en/about-us/background>.

³⁵The resolution is available online: <https://is.gd/vztCeb>.

Agenda implementation roadmaps and plans for communities and territories. The VLRs become an opportunity to be part of a group of front-runners: committed local governments which, internally, began to align policy priorities with the SDGs and to de-silo its inner processes and administrative structure; and, externally, cultivated contact with a global movement, exchanged technical

know-how and capacity-building with a community with which they shared a common cause. Besides the comprehensive, socially-rooted sustainability 'culture' spread across German society as a whole, increased exposure to climate change impacts and public debate have been drivers of a positive shift in the society-wide perception of these issues.

Key points and findings...

- **Local reviews are tilting the institutional balance, but not as much as they could.** VLRs and revamped multi-level dialogue have made **national governments more aware of localization** and the impact of local data and initiatives on national reviews, policy-making and long-term vision. VLRs have also shown **how ready local governments have been to contribute as peers to SDG alignment and implementation**. Local governments, however, should be able to foster local participation and mobilization, improving the depth and scope of the information they can provide to the national level. With adequate institutional support, the movement could spread out and reach more critical mass.
- Demand for an effective, engaging **common venue** for more multi-level dialogue and cooperation has been **essential to expand the centrality and effectiveness of SDG localization** in the policy debate. Several national governments — as diverse as Finland or Malaysia, for example — have been the drivers for the establishment of such enabling political spaces, acknowledging dialogue and knowledge-based communication as a lever for policy alignment with the SDGs.
- Much of this **cooperation is still not fully institutionalized** and has been effective in a limited number of cases: networks of interested and committed peers are established and managed via chat groups or at coffee breaks in work meetings — sometimes lacking the kind of legitimacy or institutional support that may mobilize more local governments to participate. More institutionalized cooperation — both horizontal and vertical — could include local governments even more in decision-making and budgeting processes. Several national governments have been keen to open the system up to local contributions, and SDG reviews have provided a common goal for more peer-to-peer collaboration and engaging local governments and grassroots communities that could have otherwise dropped out of the process altogether.

...and main recommendations

- **Joint mechanisms for multi-level dialogue have been key in most contexts in which implementation and reviewing cooperation has been effective:** any advancement of this kind brings the national and local levels closer together as 'peers', so that the local information can complete and improve national initiatives and policy-making, while the local level gains access to national methods, networks and the mobilization of resources.
- **Institutional creation** carries significant potential for the evolution of the national-local relationship, but it should not lead to empty vessels: **strategies should look at policy incubators in which national strategies can build on the lessons and outcomes of a diverse patchwork of local initiatives**; information hubs through which national governments can turn the raw information of territories, communities and the grassroots into vision, data and trends that actually shape policy.
- A dialogue-driven middle ground is key to re-negotiate the balance of co-ownership between national and local levels on the implementation and reviewing processes, with **national governments often leading as political empowerers of local governments that, in turn, share full responsibility of their part in the implementation of the SDGs**.

2.2 Joint mechanisms and compatibility across VLRs and VNRs

Current trends in local monitoring and reviewing show that VLRs are here to stay. Not only has the commitment to issue local reviews spiked since the beginning of the SDG-era, but more generally the consensus on the effectiveness of the VLR as a tool for complementing national reviews and exchanging good practices and information is now diffused across most regions and government levels. New projects, programmes and initiatives at the global level – thanks to the intermediation of a growing number of international stakeholders and institutions – have created new awareness on the positive impact of SDG localization and have improved horizontal collaboration. Committed cities and regions are emerging as global leaders and the drivers of policy and administrative innovation under the aegis of the international community, their international networks and the whole framework of the SDGs.

All these developments raise another fundamental question in the analysis of how legitimate a tool VLRs have become to enable local governments as catalysts and game-changers when it comes to SDG implementation: what has been the impact of this growing wave of VLRs on the local-national balance and how has it been recorded and absorbed at the national level? To address this question, this report has approached specifically the VLR cities in countries that have committed to submit a national review in 2021 and in a few of those that already presented one in 2020.

VLR-VNR intertwining in Latin America

When these guidelines were edited, the capital city of Colombia, Bogotá, was working

on a Voluntary Local Review that city hall aimed to issue by 2022. The Government of Colombia was preparing its *third* national reviews for the 2021 HLPF, following two review in 2016 and 2018. The national institutional environment surrounding SDG implementation and capacity-building for reporting was therefore especially ripe for collaboration and the trickling down of guidance and technical support. The government's commitment to reporting to the HLPF spans the whole SDG era since its inception and also offers a unique vantage point on the evolution of the national-local relationship in terms of local data, information and practices, and how this can be used for the national reviewing efforts – especially now that several of the country's major cities are already well into the drafting of their own local reviews.³⁶

The DNP has carried out a series of workshops with provincial capital cities since 2019 and has set up a roadmap for local policy SDG alignment by engaging with all candidates of the nationwide round of municipal elections in 2020. Mayoral candidates pledged to introduce the SDGs in their electoral campaigns, and additional rounds of meetings and workshops with civil society representatives were meant to 'cross-check' how much of the SDG alignment had trickled down into the candidates' programmes and their electoral bid. As was the case with a similar initiative carried out in 2017, the outcome of these activities will be included in the 2021 VNR, exploring how local authorities' approach to the SDGs has changed through time.

The 2020 VNR of Argentina devotes one chapter to SDG localization in *provincias* and municipalities, but it approaches this process

³⁶The author and the editors had an opportunity to discuss these insights in a joint meeting with both DNP and Bogotá representatives in early February 2021

from the vantage point of the CNCPS and its work of coordination and enabling horizontal dialogue and mutual training: alignment of regional strategies, the definition of local focal points, and the establishment of bilateral multi-level agreements on implementation. There is no mention of the Argentinian VLRs as a peer process of reviewing, and there is no inclusion of the information and data (often quantitatively significant) that the VLRs provide. Ultimately, as the federal government has historically delegated all coordination mechanisms to the CNCPS, even though the multi-level relationship remains open to collaboration and mutually reinforcing, the actual outcomes of this framework are lagging: even in 2020, when both the city of Buenos Aires and the federal government set off to publish their respective reviews at the same time, no true mechanisms of dialogue – be they formal or not – were set up.

Finally, there are two pilot experiences with Voluntary Subnational Reports in Latin America, Costa Rica and Ecuador, and one is currently being developed in Mexico as a contribution to the country's 2021 VNR. It is worth noting that the VNRs submitted by these countries in 2020 made clear reference to the VSRs and highlighted the added value of local contributions to both the implementation of the SDGs and its monitoring and review.

European VLRs and VNRs: what to expect in 2021

The European context has also been prosperous for technical cooperation and overlapping reviewing processes between the local and the national governments for VLRs and VNRs. This 'juxtaposition' of the two trajectories, for instance, was also a positive driver of collaboration and the relative expansion of a multi-level ecosystem in the case of Bristol in the United Kingdom. The city has long been studied as a best practice in the group of VLRs, especially

because of the articulate and cross-level mechanism of advocacy, mobilization and policy-making that has laid the groundwork for both the VLR and the outstanding localization performance of the city since it aligned its institutional system with the SDGs. Bristol's approach to the SDGs came from a bottom-up push from the grassroots, specifically from a set of stakeholders that joined forces in the Bristol SDG Alliance in 2015.

By 2018, the two tracks of SDG adaptation and implementation, at the national and local levels, began to converge. By November 2018, Bristol was engaged by the national government in the development of the national SDG and the 2030 Agenda policy platforms. The alliance included public entities, civil society organizations, as well as academic institutions and the private sector. The first advances in the institutionalization of the alliance's proposals for the city came in January 2019 when Bristol – via a process inclusive of most local stakeholders – established the One City Plan to "provide a collective vision for organizations and individuals all across the city, rather than serve as a plan for city government alone".³⁷ It is within the One City Plan that the city council began the process of drafting its VLR. At basically the same time, in 2018, the British Government began working on the VNR that it planned to submit at the 2019 HLPF. By November 2018, Bristol was engaged in the process of information exchange and collection of local experiences set in motion by the government. Bristol and Leeds hosted public consultation events that allowed the government to sit and discuss SDG implementation with local stakeholders and representatives from the local communities. While the two timelines were ultimately not fully compatible and Bristol could not eventually provide input *directly* into the definitive version of the British VNR, the mutual acknowledgement between the two reviewing processes was also key for the legitimization of the local mobilization within

³⁷City of Bristol, 'Bristol and the SDGs. A Voluntary Local Review of Progress 2019', ed. Sean Fox and Allan Macleod (Bristol, 2019), 11, <https://bit.ly/2YFdtU1>.

the community. Bristol, for instance, was officially invited to take part in the British delegation that travelled to the 2019 HLPF to present the national review. And it is through the national level that the city was exposed

to the inclusive consultation processes that it then applied to the policy initiatives review of its own VLR (see Section 3.3 for further details).

LIVE LABORATORY BOX 2. *VLR–VNR compatibility in Finland*

When Finland's first VNR came out in 2016, the institutional environment through which the national and local levels had cooperated towards the presentation of the review had already been generally inclusive and a catalyst for multi-level dialogue. The dedicated Secretariat within the Prime Minister's Office, in charge of the VNR process, also maintained a constructive dialogue with cities in the follow-up of the first VNR submission and, in particular, as the process launched for the 2020 VNR and more municipalities began to express interest in producing their own local reviews.

The uniqueness of the Finnish case became more apparent in 2020 as both the local and national levels finalized their own reviews. Helsinki had published its first VLR

a year prior and had worked as a facilitator and broker of technical information with both the national government and the other cities working on a VLR. Within this new 'enabling environment', Espoo and Turku were able to coordinate their efforts so that they could disseminate results and communicate on the process they had developed together; at the same time, they could coordinate with the national government as it finalized the VNR and prepared its presentation for the 2020 HLPF.

The result is a VNR, presented at the highest political level of review, of the current state of SDG implementation, which features a whole section on the contribution of local and regional governments to the achievement of the 2030 Agenda. Not only does the section report on the policy initiatives,

grassroots organizations and proposals, and the institutional creation that has been brought about by localization and the alignment of local policy with the SDGs, but it also sponsors the three Finnish VLRs — with focus boxes explaining content and methods in detail — and legitimizes local reviewing by bringing it to the same level as national reviewing.

This increased legitimacy and mutual recognition has been a driver in the mobilization and inclusion of even more municipalities in the Finnish 'community' of VLR cities, and provided evidence of how important VNRs, VLRs and the intertwining of the two can be when it comes to promoting policymaking and strategizing, which are fully aligned with the SDGs.

Germany and Spain have also risen to a prominent role in the SDG implementation reporting landscape. Cities in both countries have formed large 'VLR clusters' and account for about 16 per cent of all VLRs published to date (10 documents out of 63). Moreover, the two sustainable development strategic documents from North Rhine-Westphalia and the Valencian Country, both drafted by regional governments and both published in 2016, are the two earliest VLR-like documents on record. Both countries are also currently preparing their VNRs for the 2021 HLPF. It is particularly interesting, therefore, to study whether such proactive VLR communities have been able to affect the national reporting process. At the time of these guidelines being prepared, the details of the process leading to Germany's 2021 VNR had not been fully disclosed and no actual systemic collaboration framework had been set up. The channels of collaboration and communication between the national and local levels, however, are improving. German municipalities have organized to coordinate and engage with both the national government and their local communities. German national LGAs, such as the Council of German Cities (*Deutsche Städtetag*, DST) and the German Association of Towns and Municipalities (*Deutsche Städte- und Gemeindebund*, DStGB), have been important in mediating across levels and supporting municipalities in their work on advocacy, awareness-raising and community-building. Several German LGAs have reached a preliminary agreement with the federal government to include the information that the LGAs will collect in their Voluntary Local Government Review in the national VNR to be presented at the 2021 HLPF. A similar

agreement has been reached by the LGAs of Norway and Sweden – KS and SALAR – and their respective national governments.

In the Spanish context, the national government appointed a Secretary of State of the 2030 Agenda and established multi-stakeholder and multi-level working groups to prepare an updated sustainable development strategy in time for the submission of the country's VNR to the HLPF in July 2021. Besides these new cooperation channels, Spanish local and regional governments have also been involved in the preparation of the VNR. The national LGA – the Spanish Federation of Municipalities and Provinces (*Federación Española de Municipios y Provincias*, FEMP) – signed an agreement with the new 2030 Agenda Secretary of State on mutual support towards the localization of the SDGs. The FEMP distributed a survey across most Spanish municipalities to study several variables of institutional adaptation and mobilization: institutional organization to address and implement the 2030 Agenda; policy alignment; knowledge of the SDG framework and measures of implementation; ownership of the reviewing process; and local contributions to the achievement of the national sustainable development strategy. The survey was carried out throughout February 2021 and its responses should add to the contributions that the local government constituency is aiming to make to the national reviewing process. The baseline output is to at least preserve (and possibly improve) the chapter that Spain's 2018 VNR dedicated to local and regional governments and SDG localization.

Key points and findings...

- Local reviews have shown much progress and **the VLR community is growing more and more relevant** in the SDG implementation framework; the prospects are very optimistic in terms of increased effectiveness of institutional local–national linkages and more cooperation in the co-ownership of both VLRs and VNRs
- There is **growing evidence of the impact of local reviews on VNRs and the national monitoring process**; local representatives have joined national delegations that present VNRs at the HLPF; **the 'local government sections' in VNRs are becoming more complex, detailed, co-produced** and 'complicit' in the national effort to implement the SDGs through effective, pervasive policy
- This progress is apparent in the best practices that have laid the groundworks for the inclusive, cooperative reporting of the future. **Finland** sums up the findings and input of the VLRs in its own report; the **United Kingdom** is working to include as much local information as possible in the VNR, and British municipalities were invited to be part of the delegation that presented the VNR at the 2019 HLPF. Several other countries have collected **first-hand information on the localization process directly from sub-national governments** (e.g., Spain) or have involved local governments in the drafting processes of their respective VNRs (e.g., the governments of Iceland, the Netherlands, Serbia and Turkey, among others).
- **Voluntary Sub-National Reviews (VSRs)** are also playing a role in 'summing up' **the state of the art of SDG localization in specific national contexts**. Their ability to provide a lot of information from a diversity of vantage points can be helpful for national governments willing to include local contributions in the process in national reviews, strategizing and mid-term planning: the Governments of **Germany, Sweden and Norway**, just to mention a few, have already **agreed with national LGAs to use VSRs as a valuable input to VNRs**.

...and main recommendations

- The national reporting is now increasingly inclusive of multi-stakeholder and local contributions in the decision-making process that leads to the creation of the VNR. New intermediary institutional venues such as cross-level committees and working groups can support both sides to meet in the middle and join forces. Their agenda should focus on core issues still growing into shape: how is **local information being considered** or included? **What parts of the VNRs** will take local data and input into consideration? What **formal participation of local governments representatives is expected** or allowed in the drafting process?
- The Finnish case shows that **coordination between local and national efforts can be politically appealing**: there is political traction in being supported by a front-running city that is invested in the SDG process and views the national process as co-owned by its municipalities. More local-national government platforms could work like this and design **'multi-level reviews'** that address different issues from different perspectives
- The most effective case studies show that, as expected, a **'cultural' commitment to sustainability as a driving force** of national policymaking is a great added-value to cross-tier collaboration. Finnish society has been fertile ground for more comprehensive means of dialogue on SDG implementation at all levels. **A tradition of local strategizing and planning** on sustainable development (e.g., Brazil, Benin or Germany) is also essential to create a community of like-minded sub-national governments ready to measure performance and results according to the degree of sustainability and consistency with the 2030 Agenda of the policies that they develop

3 The key dimensions to make the national-local link work

There are several ways in which the relationship between local and national governments in SDG implementation and monitoring can play out – and several intervening variables to take into account. This section explores four dimensions in particular, with the aim to provide as comprehensive a view as possible on the opportunities and potential of multi-level collaboration and the establishment of adequate institutional environments for this joint effort:

- a) **the mainstreaming of the SDGs, i.e.,** the ability to adapt local policymaking to the SDGs, making the 2030 Agenda and its targets the framework of reference for local initiatives, strategic objectives and alliance-building;
- b) **the use of indicators to assess SDG implementation,** as well as the ability to collect, manage and interpret national and/or local data as a monitoring tool for the performance of local and regional governments;
- c) **social participation and mobilization in the implementation and reviewing processes, i.e.,** the ability of local governments to engage with bottom-up movements and demands, increasing ownership and widening the support base for SDG-aligned policies and initiatives – consistent with the core SDG principle of leaving no one and no place behind;
- d) **the means of implementation designed,** for SDG localization to actually take place, in line with (or regardless of) strategic planning and political expectations at all levels.



3.1 Local and national commitment to the mainstreaming of the SDGs

Since the onset of the SDG-era and the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, the United Nations has been explicit in its ambition to establish a framework which was to be “integrated and indivisible, global in nature and universally applicable, taking into account different national realities, capacities and levels of development and respecting national policies and priorities”.³⁸ This requirement to scale the 2030 Agenda and its goals down to the different territorial levels and the societal organization of each country was a call for the ‘mainstreaming’ of the SDGs, i.e., getting the SDGs and their targets to shape, define and support national and local policy at all levels and in all sectors. The core idea was to turn the SDGs into the actual blueprint of policymaking, so that all strategic planning and decisions could be defined in accordance with the SDGs from the very first step. In order to do so, and to make the SDGs a truly whole-of-society agenda and as transformative as possible, this new consensus also required “multi-stakeholder policy development [...] to facilitate partnerships between government and nationally and sub-nationally active stakeholder networks”.³⁹

There are at least two relevant examples of how collaboration and strategic alignment have happened in a more institutionalized way across different levels of government. To date, five VLRs have been issued by African cities – Cape Town and four Kenyan counties: Busia, Kwale, Marsabit and Taita Taveta. However, thanks to the strong involvement of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), several African local governments are working to publish their own VLRs in 2021. Accra,

Harare, the Ngora District, Victoria Falls and Yaoundé all plan to have their reviews available this year. To date, the process of localization monitoring and reviewing on the continent has been somewhat specific to local conditions. Cape Town, for instance, created its review⁴⁰ with the assistance of an independent research institution – Mistra Urban Futures – in the framework of a research programme that supported cities willing to improve their implementation performance and increase the accountability and rigour of their monitoring efforts.⁴¹ The other four VLRs, designed in a specific process of alignment between national and sub-national reporting efforts,⁴² all share the same format and were published with the support of a key subnational institution, the Council of County Governors (COG). The publication of these VLRs was a significant statement in the framework of the global reviewing of the SDG implementation process. It is, in fact, the sole example of VLRs being drafted as a ‘trickle-down’ effect of the national reviewing strategy. The four counties were involved in the process through the COG overtly as part of the Kenyan Government’s plan to accompany countrywide reporting with multi-level initiatives and partnerships. Kenya, moreover, presented a VNR for the second time in 2020. The document acknowledges “that stakeholders’ engagement and public participation are an integral element in developing, designing and implementing policies and development strategies that benefit all Kenyans”⁴³ and that “county governments have mainstreamed the SDGs”⁴⁴ through strategic planning documents such as the County Integrated Development Plans and the Annual

³⁸United Nations General Assembly, ‘Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development’ (2015), para. 55, https://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/70/1&Lang=E.

³⁹United Nations Development Group, ‘Mainstreaming the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Reference Guide to UN Country Teams’, ed. Darren Swanson (New York: United Nations Development Group, 2017), 32.

⁴⁰Sylvia Croese, ‘Localization of the 2030 Agenda and Its Sustainable Development Goals in Cape Town’ (Cape Town, 2019), <https://bit.ly/2WaM1fa>.

⁴¹Sandra C. Valencia and David Simon, ‘Implementing the New Urban Agenda and Sustainable Development Goals: Comparative Urban Perspectives’ (Gothenburg: Mistra Urban Futures, 2017).

⁴²The national government acknowledges a fifth review, from the county of Kisumu, even though so far this has not been publicly available. See: Republic of Kenya, ‘Second Voluntary National Review on the Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals’, ed. National Treasury and Planning (Nairobi, Kenya: Republic of Kenya, 2020), 19. The city of Kisumu, capital of the eponymous county, did in fact participate in Mistra Urban Futures’ comparative pilot project on SDG localization (at least two of those case-studies, Gothenburg and Cape Town, actually grew into a VLR), and a ‘city brief’ on the performance of the city of Kisumu was included in Sandra C. Valencia and David Simon, ‘Implementing the New Urban Agenda and Sustainable Development Goals: Comparative Urban Perspectives’ (Gothenburg: Mistra Urban Futures, 2017).

⁴³Republic of Kenya, ‘Second Voluntary National Review on the Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals’, 18.

⁴⁴Republic of Kenya, 19.

Development Plans. The COG, in partnership with the County Assemblies Forum (CAF), also developed a comprehensive Voluntary Subnational Review in 2020; together with the insight of the four county VLRs, all these locally-sourced information and data were included in the national review too.

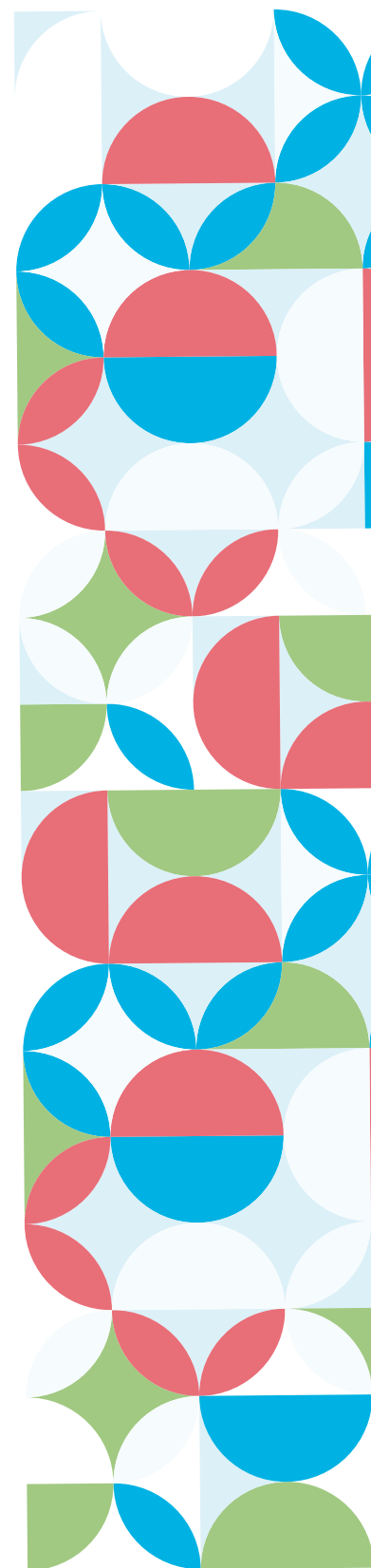
This link between national and local efforts to mainstream the SDGs at all levels of policy-making was even clearer in the case of Japan. The early submission in 2018 of the VLRs of three Japanese cities — Kitakyushu, Toyama and Shimokawa, joined in 2019 by the city of Hamamatsu — was aptly celebrated as a trailblazing event for local reviewing and monitoring; the VLRs came from a diverse range of cities (a large intermediary harbour city with metropolitan features and a history of post-industrial renovation; an intermediary city with long-standing experience in environmentally sustainable research and innovation; and a small town chiselled through forests in the remote rural north) and provided an inspiring template for a similarly diverse audience of cities worldwide. The cities also followed the UNSG-UNDESA guidelines closely, linking their own local process of awareness and participation overtly to the global SDG implementation reviewing effort.

These cities' experience was built on a long-standing alliance with the national government. On the one hand, the actual VLRs were developed through a collaboration between the four municipalities and the Institute for Global Environmental Strategies (IGES),⁴⁵ established directly by the Japanese Government in 1998 as a front-runner in sustainable development research and the “transition to a sustainable future” through “innovative policies and actions”.⁴⁶ It has grown into a public interest incorporated foundation with a large network of partners across civil society, academia and the private sector. With this background, the institute was inherently linked to the establishment of an SDG platform in the country, on a mission to “mainstream sustainability into the institutional frameworks and policymaking

processes of countries, cities, and communities”.⁴⁷

On the other hand, the VLRs are just the cusp of a process which began even before the SDG-era, through a pair of national programmes through which the Japanese Government pushed local governments to introduce sustainable development concepts, terminology and long-term objectives into their local policy toolkits: the Eco-Model City and the Future City initiative. The Eco-Model City programme was established in 2008 as a governmental initiative to set up live laboratories for resilient and low-carbon cities fully embedded in the country's productive and mobility systems. By 2013, 23 cities had been included in the programme. The Future City initiative was created in 2011, selecting cities committed to evolve into communities based on “sustainable social and economic systems and recovering social solidarity”; 11 cities were originally selected for the initiative. The initiatives were both part of a larger, all-encompassing national strategy — the ‘New Growth Strategy’⁴⁸ — that the Japanese Government had set up since 2010, with 21 nation-wide projects addressing the country's core challenges of sustainability, ageing and environmental resilience. Unsurprisingly, all four Japanese VLR cities were selected for both initiatives and have been embedded in this kind of vision and approach since the beginning. This cascading set of actions from the top down has been a blueprint to make SDG mainstreaming more efficient in the country; in 2018, the initiatives expanded to include the 2030 Agenda framework and evolved into the ‘SDGs Future City’ (established with 29 participant municipalities and grown to involve 60 municipalities today) and the ‘SDG Municipal Model’ programmes. The implementation and monitoring culture that this ecosystem established has trickled down across various territorial levels. SDG Future Cities, for instance, are asked to report every year to the national government about the achievement of the programme's goals. This imprinted attitude towards monitoring

3 The key dimensions to make the national-local link work



⁴⁵For more information, see: <https://www.iges.or.jp/en/about>.

⁴⁶IGES, ‘Sustainability, Partnership, Solutions, Change’ (Hayama: Institute for Global Environmental Strategies, 2018), 2.

⁴⁷IGES, 2.

⁴⁸See for reference: https://www.sg.emb-japan.go.jp/jp_new_growth_stgy.pdf.

LIVE LABORATORY BOX 3.***Getting everybody on board: The process of broadening Finland's VLR community***

While the Finnish 'enabling environment' was, since the very beginning, founded on inclusion and multi-level collaboration, the issue of mainstreaming the SDGs in Finland's society and administration – i.e., making it the lens through which Finnish local governments could begin making policy and engaging with their communities – was not always as straightforward. Even a city like Turku, which has been involved in local reviewing since the earliest stages, has experienced a structural change in policy priorities; the administration, the citizenship and all local stakeholders had to understand and learn about the 2030 Agenda before fully implementing it as a new 'paradigm' for local action. The city's pre-existing urban strategy was approved in 2014, before the SDG-era, but it was updated and revamped in 2018. On that occasion, however, no reference was made to the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda, and it was the VLR process that gave city hall the opportunity to re-frame the city's long-standing commitment

to sustainability in terms and actions that were compatible with the SDGs.

Mainstreaming a holistic, all-encompassing framework like the SDGs has, at times, been challenging for the municipalities that are now following the steps of the Finnish front-runners and are preparing their own local review. One of the added values of the review as a policy innovation tool has been finding out about the local administration itself: the inner functioning, the balance across departments and the many siloes that localization aims to bring down and replace with a 'whole-of-government' approach at the local level too. This work of self-discovery, while essential to re-align strategy and initiatives with the SDGs, has also made it clear to municipalities (in Finland as elsewhere) how demanding and time- and resource-intensive the task of mainstreaming the SDGs can be, on top of the day-to-day activity that a local administration runs.

These issues notwithstanding, the Finnish Government and the municipalities that have either published or begun working on a VLR could rely on a valuable asset: the country's deeply embedded and genuine attachment to the values of sustainability, social resilience and protection of natural resources and the environment. The national mindset and fundamental values, in other words, already resonated with the objectives of the 2030 Agenda, and the strategic alignment to the SDGs, the adaptation of national and local policy-making and even the work of awareness-raising and advocacy with residents, entrepreneurs or pupils was made significantly easier because of this long-standing attitude of Finnish society as a whole. This kind of value-driven commitment and mindset is the outcome of a lengthy and complex work; local reviews, by measuring impact, collecting stories and experiences, can help make these values and goals central to the political and social life of a local community.

performance in SDG adaptation and alignment has contributed to turning Japanese municipalities into some of the most engaged front-runners in the sustainable development and VLR movements today.

The effectiveness of the examples mentioned above shows that virtuous communication across various levels of government can have a meaningful effect on SDG implementation. Raising awareness on this

kind of positive spill-over and the outcomes of systemic "whole-of-government" approaches can be a catalyst for local governments that – even though they have been embedded in an enabling and committed multi-level government system – may have not yet perceived the VLR movement as an opportunity for horizontal cooperation and empowerment. In Indonesia, for instance, the national government has approached policy alignment with the SDGs systematically. It issued a national decree⁴⁹

⁴⁹The presidential decree No. 59/2017 (Peraturan Presiden Republik Indonesia Nomor 59 Tahun 2017 tentang Pelaksanaan Pencapaian Tujuan Pembangunan Berkelanjutan) is available online, with more resources and commentary, at this link (in Indonesian): <https://www.sdg2030indonesia.org/page/5>.

to make it mandatory for both the national and local level to assimilate the SDGs into sustainable development strategic planning; later regulations further set up “annual reports and bi-annual monitoring at all levels of governance”,⁵⁰ a mechanism of internal reviewing which has proven effective in other contexts,⁵¹ as a way to achieve and maintain the mainstreaming of the SDGs active at all levels.

At the same time, UCLG Asia Pacific (UCLG ASPAC) has worked steadily in collaboration with APEKSI,⁵² the national LGA, as well as 16 provinces and 14 municipalities, on the LOCALISE (Leadership, Ownership and Capacities for Agenda 2030 Local Implementation and Stakeholders Empowerment) programme, which explored, with the support of the European Union, the status of SDG implementation in the country and the potential for improvement, and surveyed all participants for an up-to-date diagnosis of the main structural issues hindering localization, while looking for the development of common, bottom-up solutions.⁵³ Even though the nation-wide push for alignment and implementation by the central government maintains the domestic relationship strongly top-down, the enabling environment established to mainstream the SDGs could also provide a platform for Indonesian cities to contribute to local reviews and, at the same time, grow into a paradigmatic example of the benefits of overt multi-level collaboration and the national-local link in the localization of the SDGs.

Key points and findings...

- **Multi-level collaboration is key to mainstreaming the SDGs:** the national level can contribute resources, vision and strategic direction; **the local level can bring them down to the communities and territory**, as they guide local policies, initiatives, debate, the commitment to and a demand for a more sustainable future
- **‘Whole-of-society’ approaches**, in which all stakeholders from the national level down to civil society and the grassroots share a mindset of aligning the way their society works with the SDGs, **are at the heart of localization**, and national governments can lead the shift towards this objective

...and main recommendations

- **The policy and knowledge streams of the SDGs are still too institutionally fragmented.** An effective coalition of national and local governments should aim to **overcome any bottlenecks** hindering local initiatives and participation
- There is **strong potential to strengthen horizontal collaboration** and mutual support at the local level so as to **promote SDG mainstreaming where it matters most:** in territories

⁵⁰UCLG, The Localization of the Global Agendas (Barcelona, 2019), 107, <https://www.gold.uclg.org/sites/default/files/ENG-GOLD-V-2020.pdf>.

⁵¹In the case of Argentina (mentioned in Section 2.2 above), the National Council for Social Policy Coordination (CNCPS) — which, besides coordinating the national reviewing effort, is also in charge of technical support and knowledge exchange on SDG implementation — has provided a hub for local governments to work, train and learn. As part of its tasks, the council also collects regional reports (<https://is.gd/Oc7k63>, 18 reports were available in January 2021) and municipal toolkits (<https://is.gd/Lq7vq>) on SDG localization.

⁵²More information on the Association of Local Governments across Indonesia (Asosiasi Pemerintah Kota Seluruh Indonesia, APEKSI) on their website (in Indonesian and English): <https://apeksi.id/>.

⁵³The details of the programme are available online (in Indonesian): <https://localisesdgs-indonesia.org/>.

3.2 Building an evidence base: How can the two levels work together?

Reliance on data, indicators and, generally, quantifiable information has been at the core of the global strategy for the implementation of the SDGs. Data and measurements are essential to understand and establish a baseline in the policy context in which the SDGs are to be achieved or implemented – that is, they are essential to assess what the problem is, and how (or whether) the SDGs can provide a solution. The geography of a territory, its demography, its economic performance and fairness, the effectiveness of its health or education systems, the energy it consumes, the jobs that it creates and the households it supports, the houses that have been built, and where, how and for whom. Comprehensive and disaggregated data truly can provide the most effective snapshot of a given community at a given time. Similarly, even if policy (be it local or national) was adapted to the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda was implemented, accessible data and comparable indicators would be necessary to measure its impact and plan ahead – that is, to know whether the solution is actually solving the problem. This has put significant pressure on local governments with regard to their ability to retrieve, collect, analyse and share data and the information they can provide.

When it comes specifically to the SDGs, moreover, indicators have been a controversial topic since the onset. On the one hand, since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, the United Nations has coordinated the task of defining the indicators to be used to measure the implementation and the achievement of the SDGs via its Inter-Agency Expert Group on the SDGs (IAEG-SDGs). Work on these indicators has accelerated as the 'Decade of Action' approached; at this time, following the 51st Session of the United

Nations Statistical Commission, the global indicator framework no longer contains Tier III indicators, i.e., those with little or no methodological development or international standard.⁵⁴ On the other hand, as these indicators were developed within a purely intergovernmental setting, the data that is required to measure implementation or 'performance' and the human and technical resources needed to collect and work with these data were designed to be available mainly to national governments and national statistical offices. These resources and capacities continue to be largely unavailable to most local and regional governments, perhaps with the exception of large and wealthy regions or metropolitan areas. Most analyses on monitoring implementation at the local level underscore that [local] "authorities face several difficulties in collecting and using data to measure their progress in achieving the SDGs",⁵⁵ to the extent that compliance with the recommended use of indicators and access to adequate disaggregated data are at risk of becoming an actual obstacle for the participation of more local governments in the VLR movement. Despite these structural obstacles and shortcomings, however, many local governments have often been able to collect, manage or even produce large amounts of the very data that it is then used to monitor SDG implementation. Many of SDG 11 metrics, for instance, refer directly to policy areas, targets and competences that are commonly held by local governments. It is essential that these capacities are strengthened, and improved local-national links can provide long-needed support in this regard.

It is also important to stress one key point in the relationship between the local level and

⁵⁴ To get a grasp of how rapidly the indicator framework has evolved, it is interesting to note how volume one of these guidelines referred to December 2019 data on indicator availability and stressed that almost half of all indicators were still methodologically underdeveloped or unavailable: barely over half (50.9 per cent) of all indicators were fully developed and standardized (Tier I), and 20 out of 232 indicators were in Tier III.

⁵⁵ Alice Siragusa et al., 'European Handbook for SDG Voluntary Local Reviews' (Luxembourg, 2020), 14, <https://doi.org/10.2760/670387>.

the rest of the implementation ecosystem, especially when it comes to indicators: data collection, management, analysis and dissemination can be key instruments in the hands of local governments, inasmuch as the “process of producing a VLR may lead cities to suggest additional targets and indicators for the SDGs”.⁵⁶ The city of Los Angeles, for instance, structured its VLR process so that organized groups of residents could take part not only in the realization of the report and its analysis, but even in the actual adaptation of indicators sets and toolkits. One of the tasks included changing the terms and words used in the indicators so that they could be more representative of the reality of each neighbourhood involved in the process – consistent with the understanding that localization “has evolved [...] to adapting the SDGs, their targets and indicators to fit a local context and [...] ensure that a community’s priorities, needs, resources and people are at the centre of its sustainable development”.⁵⁷

Similarly, the municipality of São Paulo, in Brazil, sought to approach the issue of data management and collection in such a complex polity (São Paulo is home to about 12 million people and is divided into 32 ‘sub-prefectures’, each of which has its own sub-prefectural government and is divided into districts) with the most inclusive process possible. In order to do so, the city adopted a lesson learnt from the experience of Brazil’s national statistical office at the federal level, which, since the inception of the SDG era, set out to ‘nationalize’ the IAEG-SDGs indicators so as to make them more consistent and accessible to the national reality and stakeholders. São Paulo then mobilized to further ‘localize’ the adaptation work set up by the national statistical office. A ‘diagnostic tool’,⁵⁸ published by the Inter-Departmental Working Group on the SDGs of the municipal government, collected the results of a year-long series of city-wide initiatives which engaged at least 26 sub-prefectures in the

LIVE LABORATORY BOX 4. *Indicators and local reviews in the Finnish community*

When faced with the question of what requirements their VLRs had to comply with, and what structure or template the reviews had to follow, the use and management of data and indicators was a key issue for Finnish cities. The availability of reliable and comparable data and the human and technical resources needed to adequately explore and use them were part of the debate in the process of drafting the reviews.

The approach to indicators in the Finnish VLRs has been mixed. Helsinki’s 2019 VLR followed the same structure of the Finnish VNRs and focused its analysis on the five SDGs (4, 8, 10, 13 and 16) that were being assessed at that year’s HLPF. This allowed the VLR to take a deeper look at the data available on these specific goals and their targets, with most data coming from local sources and datasets available to municipal departments and agencies. Espoo, on the other hand, studied over 90 ‘official’ SDG indicators that were directly applicable to

the city, but also worked extensively to adapt their scope and ‘tailor’ their measurement to the features and uniqueness of Espoo and its communities. Finally, Turku, worked on the alignment of the city’s pre-existing resources for the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda framework; Turku had already identified 63 indicators to monitor the achievement of its 2014 urban sustainability strategy (*Kaupunkistrategian*). Even if it was updated in 2018, the strategy actually made no reference to the SDGs. The VLR became an opportunity to explore the degree of ‘compatibility’ of the strategy with the objectives of the 2030 Agenda, and a way to align its plans and ambitions with the targets set by the 2030 Agenda. Ultimately, 59 indicators from the urban strategy were integrated in the VLR, with a significant reliance on the data collected (and often disaggregated down to the municipal level) by Finland’s national statistical office (*Tilastokeskus*).

⁵⁶ Niki Deininger et al., ‘Cities Taking the Lead on the Sustainable Development Goals. A Voluntary Local Review Handbook for Cities’ (Pittsburgh: Brookings Institution, 2019), 11, <https://brook.gs/3gW90Uu>.
⁵⁷ City of Los Angeles, ‘Los Angeles Sustainable Development Goals. A Voluntary Local Review of Progress in

2019’ (Los Angeles, 2019), 5–6, <https://bit.ly/3bcM9Pq>.

⁵⁸ Grupo de Trabalho Intersecretarial de ODS da Prefeitura de São Paulo, ‘Diagnóstico de Indicadores Para Monitoramento Dos ODS Em São Paulo’ (São Paulo: Cidade de São Paulo, 2020), <https://is.gd/jpb1pQ>.

definition of the data that was locally available to be collected, disaggregated and analysed in the city. The 2020 report – which is directly linked to the 2019 VLR that city hall had published – eventually identified at least 390 localized and locally measurable indicators. The working group met extensively with civil society, local stakeholders, grassroots associations and organized local interest groups to further enrich the municipal dataset via a participatory process and a public consultation. The large group of participants was divided into seven key thematic groups (including core local policy themes such as health, environment, education or the economy) and met as frequently as city departments, with up to seven meetings per week. The groups worked to identify accessible, workable baselines for the key local indicators, but also tried as much as possible to select metrics that were applicable to the contexts of neighbourhoods and districts. Ultimately, the workshops led to the identification of over 500 local indicators, which will be soon be publicly available. The results of the participatory process will upgrade and update the current data-management open data platform run by the city hall.⁵⁹ The administration aims to use the large dataset not only to assess and report on the implementation of the SDGs, but also as a baseline evaluation of (a) performance in most other policy areas and (b) the effectiveness of local policymaking in general.

While posing a challenge which is common to all the levels of government involved in the reporting process, in certain contexts data collection, management and measurement has paradoxically served as a catalyst for further multi-level collaboration. In Colombia, for instance, the issue of indicators and the ‘visualization’ of progress in the implementation and localization of the SDGs has been addressed from several institutional tiers. The central government’s National Planning Department (DNP, *Departamento Nacional de Planeación*, see also above,

Section 2), which acts at the ministerial level, has been largely in charge with the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in the country, and has already submitted two VNRs, in 2016 and 2018. In March 2018, the DNP published the national strategic document for the coordination of SDG implementation across Colombia; this was a 267-page set of guidelines which acknowledged structural territorial issues (such as regional inequalities and urban-rural cleavages) hindering the actual achievement of the SDGs on a more localized level, closer to the reality of the territories and communities that it sought to engage.⁶⁰ The document also provided the first national assessment of selected IEAG-SDGs indicators, attempted disaggregation at the regional level and, most importantly, sparked a conversation on the necessity of providing technical support for local governments to aptly measure their own progress: providing the resources and knowledge needed to collect the required data and re-defining several indicators so that they were actually viable in Colombia’s local communities and able to report on the actions undertaken in its territories.

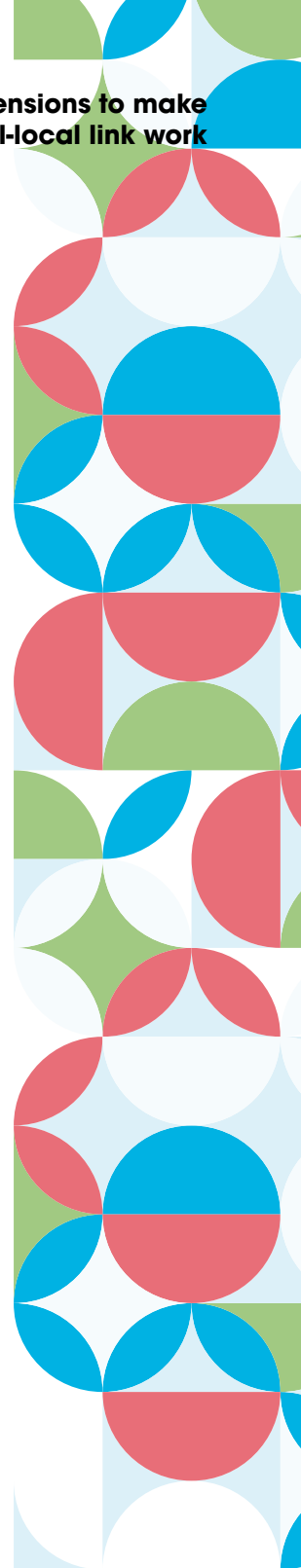
This ambition turned into an open framework of cooperation between the DNP, civil society (via the Corona Foundation)⁶¹ and the municipalities involved in the civil society network ‘Cities How Are We Doing’ (RCCV, *Red Ciudades Cómo Vamos*).⁶² Bogotá – the country’s capital, largest city and one of three Colombian municipalities currently working on a VLR, alongside Medellín and Manizales – voluntarily joined this capacity-building process since its onset. Since then, the city has been working on an improved approach to official SDG indicators, in an attempt to adapt them as much as possible to both the data available from municipal sources and the reality to which the SDGs are being applied. Bogotá has also been working on a ‘district-wide indicator toolkit’, a set of recommendations, good practices and technical advice for other neighbourhoods in the district to begin developing resources

⁵⁹ The web portal is available online at this link: <http://observasampa.prefeitura.sp.gov.br/ods-sao-paulo>.

⁶⁰ CONPES, ‘Estrategia Para La Implementación de Los Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible (ODS) En Colombia’.

⁶¹ More information online at: <https://www.fundacioncorona.org/>.

⁶² The network’s website is accessible at this link: <http://redcomovamos.org/>.



and capacities to self-assess and report on the localization of the SDGs in their communities. While the analysis of Section 2.1 showed how the Colombian context has been an enabling environment for SDG implementation in general, this has been especially true for monitoring and data management in particular. The priorities of civil society, non-governmental and cooperation actors have long been aligned with the SDGs, and the DNP and UNDP have jointly developed an SDG Corporate Tracker to promote implementation analysis even in the private sector. This background has been key for Bogotá to be able to push for new institutional linkages that have increased dialogue and opportunities for localization and collaboration.⁶³

Mexico is also going to submit its third VNR in 2021. Because of this, the federal government has paid growing attention to the issue of data and indicators and the adaptation of the IAEG-SDGs sets to the national reality. The development of the Mexican VLRs (Mexico City, Oaxaca, Yucatán and Ciudad Valle) has inevitably also put the local approach to indicators in the spotlight, and the country's thriving enabling environment has engendered various opportunities for cross-level collaboration. Mexico City has developed a three-step roadmap on data and indicators: an analysis of the compatibility of local metrics with the 'official' United Nations system; the use of national-available data – as collected by the work of Mexico's National Institute of Statistics, Geography and Informatics (*Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía e Informática*, INEGI) – to support local knowledge and information; and feeding the national reporting and measurement systems with locally-available data.

Local data and indicators can be an essential support to improve data disaggregation and foster more tailored, precise and actually co-owned and locally-sourced policy solutions and designs. In the case of La Paz, for instance, the city's 2018 VLR made extensive



⁶³The team had an opportunity to discuss local-national linkages in Colombia's implementation strategy in an interview with officials from Bogotá City Hall on January 18, 2021.

use of spatial visualization both in the way it showed and communicated data and the way it collected it and designed its indicators.⁶⁴ Data disaggregated at the district level can provide more valuable information for policy-making to respond more adequately to the challenges that affect specific communities and territories – especially if considering the inherent differences among the seven urban macro-districts and the two rural ones into which La Paz is divided administratively, and that municipal resources and facilities are distributed across the city by district.

In its latest methodological guide, issued in November 2020, Barcelona's city hall reconstructed its indicator toolkit entirely,⁶⁵ favouring an extremely localized approach that emphasizes district-level disaggregation, especially in socially-sensitive sectors such as education, wellbeing and healthcare – a testament to the ability of local governments to collect relevant, sensible data in the policy fields in which they are most proactive and accountable, although they are often not endowed with formal competences and powers to act.

Indicators, ultimately, can be a tool for local governments to emphasize how essential the information they collect and disseminate can be for both the national and global reviewing processes, and a structured VLR with strong statistical support can be “an opportunity to further enrich the conversation on sustainable development globally and elevate the priorities of individual cities”.⁶⁶ It is key that the implementation and monitoring mechanisms take advantage of this unique knowledge to complement the data available at the national and global levels, providing local governments with the appropriate key role in the conversation on data and measurement, as well as with the adequate resources, assistance and truly enabling technical environments for their ability to collect thorough, reliable and comparable data to improve steadily.

Key points and findings...

- Participatory processes and truly inclusive bottom-up initiatives have been key to **overcome the mismatch between 'official' indicators and local data analysis capacity**; São Paulo, Los Angeles, Bristol are examples of virtuous cross-level collaboration of this kind
- **'Crowdsourcing' new ideas on valuable indicators** that suit local realities and challenges better has translated into a **greater capacity for the local level** to act
- The need to collect, explore and adapt indicators and data have been essential drivers – in Colombia, Mexico, or Malaysia, for example – of **innovative local policy actions**, horizontal cooperation and the emergence of new venues of multi-level collaboration
- A positive externality of improved VLR-VNR relations and local-national interlinkages, better and **mutually supportive dialogue on data, statistics, indicators and methods** between the local and national levels is also highlighting how both **data ecosystems can complement and strengthen each other**, improving the effectiveness and inclusiveness of innovative policy-making at all levels

...and main recommendations

- Data collection and analysis and indicator definition are still **resource-intensive tasks for most local governments**; national governments and statistics offices, LGAs, global networks and civil society should **provide support to local governments looking for better local data** and knowledge-driven policy solutions
- **Peer-to-peer learning and exchange** have been crucial; an **effective multi-level alliance** could provide more opportunities to collaborate on indicator and data management, **replicate good practices**, share open-access technology, methods and experiences
- **Data disaggregation will be an outstanding challenge in the next few years**: more precise, detailed and tailored data collection and management methods will be crucial to alleviate some of the disparities and gaps in local governments' ability to truly align with the SDGs and localize their impact, and capacity-building for even more sub-municipal data will be essential to address social and spatial inequalities through information collected and managed directly at community level

⁶⁴City of La Paz, 'Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible y Su Localización En El Municipio de La Paz', ed. Carla Cordero Sade et al. (La Paz, 2018), <https://bit.ly/2WAovXY>.

⁶⁵Barcelona City Hall, 'Agenda 2030 de Barcelona. Fites ODS i Indicadors Clau' (Barcelona: Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2020).

⁶⁶Deininger et al., 'Cities Taking the Lead on the Sustainable Development Goals. A Voluntary Local Review Handbook for Cities', 11.

3.3 No person and no place left behind: Participating from the bottom and to the top

The VLRs collect a wealth of information on policies, practices and initiatives with which local communities have advanced significantly in the achievement of the SDGs in their territories. Each of these contributions provides knowledge, lessons and relatable experiences that may also guide more and more local governments as they approach the 2030 Agenda and look to be part of a larger constituency of like-minded institutions.

The VLRs, however, also contribute a lot of information in terms of process and examples; the way in which the community, the residents, the associations and all the local stakeholders were involved in the creation of the review, its adoption and approval, or its diffusion and promotion, are as important as the knowledge on the initiatives that these groups have undertaken in their cities and regions. In this regard, there are a few examples that may become effective references for other local governments interested in making their review process as inclusive, bottom-up and co-owned as possible.

Mannheim began its VLR process in 2017 – with the financial and strategic support of the SKEW-Engagement Global framework – by surveying and collecting ideas and input from the population on the approach that the municipality should pursue to implement the SDGs. About 500 residents of the city participated in the 2017 edition of the Urban Thinkers Campus, a UN-Habitat event with the World Urban Campaign that various cities around the world host every year. The 2017 Urban Thinkers Campus in Mannheim was an opportunity for representatives of the local communities to be part of the policy discussion that was shaping the

city's approach to the 2030 Agenda and its compatibility with the city's own 'Mission Statement Mannheim 2030,' the strategy that was to comprehensively address sustainable development in city policy. The citizens were then involved through local and district councils in the discussions that validated the establishment of the strategy. 'Dialogue workshops' with the city mayor and the mayor's office were held throughout 2018, alongside events that engaged up to 22 civil society organizations and initiatives. An online platform kept the public conversation open until the city council could eventually debate – following a preliminary vote – and approve the Mission Statement Mannheim 2030, and actively begin its implementation. This kind of constant validation of the process through which a city decides to align with the 2030 Agenda and to systematically change the way it makes policy is not common and takes a proactive stance to interpret the local implementation review as a step further towards the co-ownership of the SDGs.

The example of Hawaii, the Pacific island state of the United States, is also a key case-study of a local review that was built on a strong participatory effort from civil society and all local stakeholders, and led to a new understanding of the community's commitment to the SDGs and a new shared paradigm of sustainability. The Hawaiian report is framed within a programme, the Aloha+ Challenge, first launched in 2014 (even before the official adoption of the SDGs) under the coordination of Hawaii Green Growth Local2030 Hub (HGG), a "state-wide network of public, private and civil society partners" that has been stewarding the challenge since its inception.⁶⁷ This programme actually builds on Hawaii's decades-long

⁶⁷ Hawaii Green Growth Local2030 Hub, 'Aloha+ Challenge 2020 Benchmark Report. Hawaii's Voluntary Local Review of Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals', 6.

LIVE LABORATORY BOX 5.***'Shadow reporting' and sparring systems: a co-owned VLR process?***

The participatory dimension has been key for the Finnish 'way' of reporting on local SDG implementation. All involved parties – the national government, the municipalities that worked or are working on the VLRs, the LGA, the social actors engaged – have been active in reaching out to others, sharing information and providing assistance when needed. This cooperation mechanism has been informal throughout the whole process, but this has also led to a more co-owned experience, in which both the national and local level knew they were contributing to a shared outcome and a common effort.

The positive impact of this kind of co-owned process should not be understated. Because of the possibility to interact as peers and to acknowledge how the information that came from one level of government could fit seamlessly into the other level's, the approach of both the national government and the 'VLR cities' has been expansive. The three

VLRs are bound to become six, and more smaller towns, regions and communities in Finland have shown interest in taking part in the process, especially through the intermediation of Finland's local government association. Turku and Espoo dialogued constantly throughout the process of preparation of their VLRs, 'sparring' in a way that eased a lot of the pressure and the resource-intensive tasks that usually lie behind the research, validation and organization of the contents of the reviews. Local commitment has also been a catalyst for social engagement; the debate on the 2030 Agenda and the transition towards a more sustainable society has trickled down to society as a whole, and the alignment of municipal plans and strategy with the SDGs was relevant even in municipal election campaigns as the general local elections of June 13, 2021, approached.

The national government has been supporting the expansion of the VLR community in the country and

has mobilized the necessary institutional leverage to promote horizontal dialogue across frontiers. The Governments of Mozambique and Switzerland were invited to review Finland's draft 2020 VNR and submit their comments and recommendations, a cooperative experiment so fruitful and engaging that Finland is now exploring the opportunity to replicate it at the local level, with the VLRs expected to be published in 2021. A VLR session was included in a VNR peer-learning activity with the Swedish Government, an activity likely to be repeated in the coming months. Finally, the Finnish Government has been supporting a 'Nordic' approach, pooling together the resources, knowledge and experiences of the Nordic countries, establishing a regional 'way of reviewing' the SDGs and their implementation that resonates with the values and the expectations of these countries and their societies.

experience with strategic sustainability and resilience frameworks and, most importantly, with participatory approaches to the co-production of policy and planning. As early as in 1970, the state administration had already engaged with thousands of Hawaiian residents to 'crowdsource' a strategic vision "of what the State should look like at the turn of the millennium".⁶⁸ In 2005, the gubernatorial administration created the Hawaii Sustainability Task Force with the main objective of establishing the Hawaii 2050 Sustainability Plan. The 25-member

Task Force also included local stakeholders and community representatives. The Plan was adopted in 2008,⁶⁹ and the state is mandated to publish an assessment of the plan's achievement every ten years: the first report was published in 2018,⁷⁰ and the gubernatorial administration is using the new assessment cycle as an opportunity to update the plan and fully align it with the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs.

The Aloha+ Challenge identifies six strategic 'Aloha+ Goals' which were left intentionally

⁶⁸ Office of Planning of Hawaii, '2000: Past, Present and Future', ed. Jim Dator et al. (Honolulu: Government of Hawaii and University of Hawaii, 1999), 1, <https://is.gd/cX0PtU>.

⁶⁹ The Hawaii 2050 Sustainability Plan is available online at this link: <https://is.gd/fUpAsp>.

⁷⁰ The 160-page report is available online: <https://is.gd/0hNu00>.

broad in scope so that the stakeholders that HGG was convening throughout the reviewing process could define the lines of work and study that they considered most relevant to the reality and the uniqueness of their experience. This participative, co-creation process lasted for over three years and managed to include at least 500 local stakeholders. The outcome was the Aloha+ Dashboard, built around the six strategic goals, which ultimately included 37 main targets and a total of 238 indicators that are measured in near real-time and constantly available online on a dedicated open-data platform.⁷¹

The success of the Aloha+ Challenge (it is planned that HGG and the stakeholders involved in the creation of the dashboard and the drafting of the VLR may issue a mid-term assessment report on localization progress already in 2022) is partly due to the archipelago's social mindset and 'zeitgeist': a community-driven culture overwhelmingly committed to nature, sustainability and the preservation of Hawaiian society as kept together by a spiritual bond – the very concept of aloha that the review summons – which is inherently compatible with the values enshrined in the 2030 Agenda. Hawaii's specific situation, moreover, adds to this kind of committed investment in the SDGs: an island state which has been increasingly vulnerable to the threats of climate change; a unique natural ecosystem that requires regulation as well as political and social consensus for its protection and preservation; a vibrant cultural identity; and a territorial unit scattered across a Pacific archipelago part of a continental country some 4,000 kilometres away, all turned Hawaii into an outstanding laboratory for aligning not just policy, but a people's spirit of resilience.

Section 3.2 mentioned the effort that São Paulo's city hall put into opening the

definition of its data management tools and platform to residents and stakeholders as much as possible; up to 20 people in each of the established working groups assisted municipal officers and policy-makers in defining what data was meaningful for the people that were ultimately expected to align their lives with the SDGs, and what indicators had to be measured to effectively grasp the impact of localization on community and territory. In collaboration with UNDP Argentina, in 2019 the city of Buenos Aires established the BA SDG Accelerator Lab, one of the 60 such initiatives that various offices of UNDP had helped set up across the world. The lab has actively engaged the population of several vulnerable areas in the city – informal settlements, marginalized neighbourhoods – in the definition of local high-impact policy initiatives, the collection and crowdsourcing of relevant data and evidence, as well as in 'tactical' urbanism activities for the preservation of the city's public space.

One powerful example to show how the methods and the expectations that were set for national reporting – and its ability to collect evidence of SDG alignment and mobilization – can also 'trickle down' to the local level is the case of Bristol. In order to avoid the shortcomings of cherry-picking local policy initiatives and link them to relevant SDGs (an approach that, albeit common in SDG alignment reviews, does not provide evidence of the extent to which localization has influenced the way policies are designed, implemented and assessed), Bristol chose to further 'localize' the review process by opening a consultation process at the local level with different layers of stakeholders from various sectors and interests – all from outside the city council 'ecosystem'. With this approach, which led to the consultation of over 90 stakeholders, the city managed to go beyond desk research on available local initiatives and directly

⁷¹ The dashboard metrics are available online at this link: <https://alohachallenge.hawaii.gov/>.

devolved to the community the task of assessing the 'good' practices that were consistent with Bristol's localization strategy. Ultimately, to a certain extent, Bristol's VLR brought down to the local level the very mechanism of consultation that countries used to adopt for their VNRs as they collect data, information and practices from local governments. This method put the people of the city at the centre of the review's design – as much as VNRs developed in an effective multi-level environment could put local data, knowledge and initiatives at the core of the national experience.

Participation and mobilization are also drivers of institutional and policy change in the local and national contexts in which VLRs are still being produced. Strong multi-stakeholder approaches to monitoring and reviewing open new opportunities of validation and legitimation while increasing the accountability and transparency of the process. This is one of the aims of the 'Cities How Are We Doing' (*Red Ciudades Cómo Vamos*, RCCV) civil society network in Colombia (see also Section 2.1 above), where the group has emerged as a strong civil society partner that is eagerly supporting the localization process while also 'negotiating' more agency and visibility for Colombian local governments with both local and national institutions.

The RCCV began in 1998 as an initiative focused on the city of Bogotá, but then expanded to include 21 initiatives involving 45 Colombian municipalities. The group began working on local collaboration (as well as data management) for the monitoring of the Millennium Development Goals. This was the expertise on which the network has, since 2017, built its agenda to support Colombian municipalities and districts in the process of SDG alignment and localization. Several cities have been engaged in SDG-related initiatives, and the group has developed an indicator set tailored to the needs and features of Colombian local governments.

The network, moreover, has been working with the national government's National Planning Department (DNP) and with UNDP on a guidebook on Voluntary Local Reviews for Colombian local authorities,⁷² which was launched in June 2021, in time for the HLPF. One of the purposes of the RCCV is to open up more channels of interinstitutional communication within a national system, such as Colombia's, that – while historically collaborative and fluid – has been relatively airtight and not fully inclusive. The RCCV and its guidelines are expected to set up a community of practice for Colombian local governments to join the localization movement; this critical mass would be essential to lobby for local data, initiatives, good and bad practices, achievements and shortcomings, and all available information to be included in national reporting (and policy-making) processes.



⁷² The VLR guidebook also includes an 'SDG Cities Tracker', designed by the RCCV network and the Fundación Corona, whose main purpose is to support SDG localization in Colombian cities by helping them define long-term targets aligned with the SDGs, based on historical data about indicator performance. The RCCV received a grant from UN-SDSN's Trends initiative in 2018 to strengthen and develop this tool. For more information about the tracker: <https://www.redcomovamos.org/ods>.

Key points and findings...

- Truly encompassing reviews should be able to include **communities, civil society, marginalized groups**, and a genuine representation of **the diversity of their territory** in their assessment. In several cases, the SDGs have resonated tremendously with specific **cultural facets, traditions, tacit knowledge and territorial links** that many populations have developed over centuries of local development and **the pursuit of more sustainable relationships with their environment**
- This resonance has often **fostered commitment** to the 2030 Agenda and elicited the emergence of **highly-localized and original approaches** and strategies towards a co-created and inclusive sustainable future. The 'spirit' with which Hawai'i has joined the localization process or the effectiveness with which cities like Bristol and São Paulo have engaged with the diversity of their communities show to what extent the SDGs can catalyse a demand for sustainable change that is already sweeping through society
- If implemented with a 'whole-of-society' approach, the SDGs can positively reinforce the social contract through **a truly participative and effective multi-level governance mechanism**; VLRs already tell the stories of policies, initiatives and achievements of local communities that show the power of **inclusiveness and co-ownership**
- Bottom-up participation has been successful — e.g., Mannheim, São Paulo, Oaxaca, Los Angeles, Hawaii — whenever **civil servants, experts and researchers were able to meet with citizens, interest groups and grassroots organizations**, and include their expectations and vision in the reviews

...and main recommendations

- Both VNRs and VLRs should find a way to **include civil society in their narrative** and, most importantly, in their strategy for the future; **open consultations**, accessible data and a **town-hall approach to SDG-aligned policy** can be useful tools to make progress
- More official data on vulnerable groups is strongly needed to properly identify the challenges that some specific groups face, at all levels. This is particularly relevant for **migrants, ethnic minorities, and other marginalized or discriminated groups**.
- Bottom-up contributions to the reviews are a way to **re-balance the ownership of the SDGs**. VNRs and VLRs should acknowledge the input that comes from the grassroots, and implementation can be **truly co-owned** once communities are invested in through a once-in-a-generation shift in mindset and vision; education, communication and community-building can play a key role in spreading this approach
- The role that **city networks** — either formal or not — should be emphasized as **laboratories of good practices and peer-to-peer exchange**. Communities in Colombia or Hawai'i, just to name a few, found an incentive to take part in localization in the **tools, information and methods** that other local governments had successfully implemented before

3.4 Means of implementation: Challenges and opportunities

The topic of the ‘means of implementation’, a substantial part of the debate on the global process towards the achievement of the 2030 Agenda since its earliest stages, has steadily grown into perhaps the most controversial issue on SDG reviewing and assessment – at all levels of government.

It should be considered that (according to a simple discourse analysis exploration) only eight VLR documents out of a total of 69 (11.5 percent) actually contain any mention of means of implementation besides quoting SDG 17, which contains the phrase in its official definition. This is all the more

LIVE LABORATORY BOX 6.

Means of implementation as seen from the grassroots: Disincentives and challenges to participation

Even in a context such as Finland, where the surrounding political conditions and the ‘enabling environment’ are actually favouring the emergence of a local reporting culture and have fully acknowledged the relevance of a constructive local-national relationship, the issue of means of implementation for local reviews and, more generally, for the localization of the SDGs has become a turning point for engagement and participation. This is a decisive moment which can either enable or prevent more local governments from joining the VLR movement.

At the event in which the editorial team of the guidelines had an opportunity to discuss with the Finnish VLR cities and the representatives from the national government and the national LGA, several cities raised the simple issue of how difficult it is to engage with local authorities, especially in

smaller towns or rural communities, without proposing a viable, effective roadmap to overcome the issue of available resources, necessary investment and the cost of localizing the agenda. The city of Vantaa, a municipality bordering with Helsinki and one of the Finnish local governments currently in the process of preparing their VLR, overtly pointed out that it has been challenging to make people, that is both citizens and administrators, fully aware of or commit to the SDGs aside from the more obvious element of environmental sustainability, considering how preoccupied communities are about the costs of this kind of policy innovation and the resources that are required to keep up with the commitment that it demands.

This perceived mismatch in priorities can have durable consequences on the way all levels of government are able or prepared

to invest in SDG localization. The issue was pointed out in the debate at the end of the meeting celebrated with the Finnish VLR municipalities and national institutions and authorities; if even the wealthiest regions of the global North and a society permeated by a strong sustainability culture are facing serious challenges in terms of awareness, commitment and the capacity to fund inclusive SDG implementation, what is to be expected from other countries and other local governments, where such awareness is not present? The global constituency of local and regional governments is seeking cross-level dialogue on this matter and a stronger commitment to horizontal cooperation. The VLRs and the reviewing community should work to provide more answers, solutions and replicable ideas to fill this gap and empower the local level further

impressive considering that the official UNDESA guidelines for VNRs include a section dedicated specifically to the means of implementation.⁷³ As a matter of fact, at least six of the eight local reviews that address this issue do so because they follow this template more strictly than other VLRs to structure their documents: the four Japanese cities and the two VLRs from New York City. Both of New York's VLRs describe the internal organization process with which the OneNYC office (in charge of the development of the review) has included budget and city operations departments in budget alignment initiatives to "ensure funding".⁷⁴

Even on such a controversial topic, however, a few good practices stand out to discuss how local and national reviews can support each other and define, if not a roadmap, at least some kind of guidance for other actors to follow. The VLR of the city of São Paulo, for instance, also includes a thorough review of the initiatives that have been undertaken at the national level for the localization of the 2030 Agenda. Among the institutional advances that the VLR singles out is the establishment – within Brazil's National Commission for the SDGs (*Comissão Nacional para os ODS, CNODS*) – of a 'thematic chamber' (working groups on specific implementation-related topics) on 'Partnerships and Means of Implementation of the SDGs' (*Câmara Temática Parcerias e Meios de Implementação, CTPMI*). The chamber worked for a year and "subsidized the CNODS' decisions by preparing technical studies and proposals on the development and improvement of the policies and actions required to fulfil the goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda".⁷⁵ The CTPMI issued a report on its activities in the 2018–2019 period. The document is explicit about the relevance of the involvement of local and regional governments in the implementation process and acknowledges the importance of capacity-building at the local level to promote the localization of the SDGs as a key part of a

more consistent, cross-level process. It was the CTPMI, a sectorial forum within a national institution, that referred to the empowerment of local governments as a substantial part of the means of implementation required to actually achieve the SDGs. The report goes on to suggest that LRGs be supported in terms of capacity-building of civil servants and by providing enough knowledge on "territorial planning, multi-level governance, digital literacy, open government, mapping and management of big data, [...] global learning, representation of rural-urban and territorial linkages, spatial geostatistical planning and development, [...] environmental planning and eco-management, [...] nature-based solutions, [...] resilience and mitigation of climate change, international cooperation", among several others.⁷⁶

The inevitability of a discussion on means of implementation, as well as the lack of self-sufficient answers to this question coming from the local level, was a common topic throughout the conversations held in the preparation of the guidelines. It was singled out in interviews with local administrators, and it came up often in the debate at the Madrid Expert Group Meeting on February 23–24, 2021. Some saw the issue of means of implementation also as an obstacle to the consolidation of actual horizontal cooperation among local governments on the way towards localization. On the one hand, VLR front-runners surely experienced that bringing down barriers and sharing a vision of the urban future with a community of like-minded local governments was a powerful incentive to join the 'cause' of local reporting. On the other hand, however, it was still challenging to make administrators and local politicians understand the added value of localization, especially in those municipalities in which the daily management of territory and community already felt overwhelming because of the scarce resources available.

⁷³ UNDESA, 'Handbook for the Preparation of Voluntary National Reviews', 2019.

⁷⁴ NYC Mayor's Office for International Affairs, 'Voluntary Local Review: New York City's Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development', 17.

⁷⁵ São Paulo City Hall, 'Report of Localization of Sustainable Development Goals in São Paulo', 19.

⁷⁶ Comissão Nacional para os Objetivos de Desenvolvimento Sustentável and Câmara Temática Parcerias e Meios de Implementação, 'Relatório de Atividades 2018/2019', ed. Patrícia Menezes and Sávio Raeder (Brasília: CNODS, 2019), 36, <https://is.gd/P5Zneu> [author's translation].



It is clear that local administrations are often bound to perceive tasks that relate to global vision and perspective, as being too far away from the local reality, and additional to their daily work. It is key that the global conversation on SDG implementation and localization keep the spotlight on the issue of means of implementation. This is all the more relevant in terms of local-national institutional relationships; how the means of implementation are debated and designed at the national level can have a lasting impact on the resources that local and regional governments have to localize the 2030 Agenda, and ultimately affects the degree of commitment that the local level can bring to a framework — such as the SDGs — that cannot possibly be achieved in full without these resources.

Key points and findings...

- Monitoring and review at the national and local levels show how impactful local action can be for the SDGs; this is shedding new light on **reviews as a means towards full implementation and voicing the demands for more resources and support**
- There is still a **mismatch**, however, **between the potential of localization and the resources that the local level can access**, to fully implement the SDGs
- National governments are increasingly aware of the contribution that the local level can provide and some are already de-siloing the implementation process in order to make it more **transparent, engaging and fair in terms of resource distribution** and political responsibility

...and main recommendations

- The lack of resources is keeping **many sub-national governments away from localization** and long-term monitoring; national governments can do much to help make the SDGs a local priority, especially **if the budget they allocate to implementation can trickle down to the local level** and especially to grassroots initiatives
- An **effective multi-level alliance** can be key to mainstream a real **paradigm shift**; local reviews are telling the story of how the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs have impacted the way communities and territories are making policy, and the same investment should look at the **New Urban Agenda, the Sendai Framework, the Paris Climate Agreements and all the other sustainable development documents** as a common roadmap for all levels of government
- Balanced, well-funded SDG-aligned policies at the national level can be **catalysts of further participation from the bottom-up**; national governments should foster an approach that favours holistic initiatives and policy frameworks that engage all levels and all stakeholders in the implementation process — a true ‘whole-of-society’ approach to make the process more co-owned and resource-efficient



4 The global 'ecosystem' supporting SDG localization

The VLR community has grown at a remarkable pace over the past few years, but this progress could not have been possible without the large international consensus on the need for more localization for the 2030 Agenda to be achieved and the SDG framework to succeed, which translated into overt and systematic support from the international community and global local government networks to the efforts of local and regional governments worldwide.

The ecosystem that was successfully established through the sustainable development agendas — the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs, the New Urban Agenda, the Paris Climate Agreements, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, the Addis Ababa Action Agenda, and all the ancillary documents, agreements and initiatives that helped frame this new consensus — has provided an international stage for the initiatives and best

practices of local governments committed to the fulfilment of the SDGs and the other agendas. The holistic approach of this mechanism, moreover, has empowered local governments to break internal and external siloes, fostering truer 'whole-of-society' approaches from the bottom up.

This section focuses on the work of the United Nations system and its agencies and regional commissions in the establishment of this enabling environment; on the impact of international organizations in supporting — with technical, intelligence and political resources — the emergence of a VLR community worldwide; and the role played by global networks and national local government associations (LGAs) as they were often drivers of and advocates for more cross-border collaboration among like-minded local authorities.



4.1 UN-Habitat and UCLG: A global alliance to advance the localization of the SDGs

UN-Habitat is the United Nations focal agency for local and regional governments and their associations worldwide, as well as focal point for the implementation and monitoring of the New Urban Agenda. United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) is the world's largest association of local governments and has supported the secretariat of the Global Task Force of Local and Regional Governments (GTF), which gathers more than 25 regional and global networks of local and regional authorities, since its establishment in 2013.⁷⁷

Both institutions have been long-standing partners and share a structural commitment to the localization of the SDGs. In 2014, together with UNDP, UN-Habitat and UCLG set up a series of global dialogues on the localization of the Post-2015 Agenda, yielding a set of inputs and debates that fed directly into the elaboration of the 2030 Agenda and brought the issue of the local dimension of sustainable development into the spotlight. They co-created the 'Localizing the SDGs' online platform, a tool that later evolved into Local2030,⁷⁸ the United Nations-wide initiative to advance the localization of the SDGs. More recently, under the leadership of UCLG and in close coordination with other partners, both institutions worked together in the elaboration of the SDG Localization Training Modules,⁷⁹ a learning and training tool that has been adopted extensively worldwide.

In terms of global advocacy, UN-Habitat and UCLG have often taken part together in the most relevant intergovernmental and United Nations-led fora — such as the High-Level Political Forum, where, in partnership with UNDESA, UNDP and the GTF, they have orga-

nized the Local and Regional Governments' Forum since 2018, providing local authorities with a dedicated space for political dialogue and support at one of the most relevant global political venues.⁸⁰ For the 2021 HLPF, both institutions are planning to organize the 'VLR-VSR Days', an event to unfold in parallel to the HLPF proceedings to provide a platform for local governments and stakeholders to present their work and to discuss the future of SDG localization and VLRS.

Moreover, UN-Habitat and UCLG co-host the secretariat of the United Nations Advisory Committee of Local Authorities (UNACLA),⁸¹ established in 1999 and currently the only existing channel of interaction between the United Nations system and the local government constituency formally approved by a United Nations resolution.⁸² Its main purpose is to bring the local governments' perspective to the UN system and to contribute to the implementation of the main global agendas at the local level.

UN-Habitat and UCLG perceive VLRS and VSRs as powerful tools to advance the localization of the SDGs and as key pieces of the larger puzzle of achieving the SDGs by 2030. With this in mind, UN-Habitat has recently developed an integrated strategy to support SDG localization that builds on three pillars: the Global Urban Monitoring framework; supporting the Voluntary Local Reviews; and the SDG Cities Programme (see also Insight Box 2).

UCLG and the GTF regularly monitor the progress made by local and regional governments in the localization of the SDGs at national and global levels and assess their

⁷⁷More information about the task force is available online at this link: <https://www.global-taskforce.org/>.

⁷⁸More information about Local2030: <https://www.local2030.org/>.

⁷⁹The training modules can be accessed online: <https://www.learning.uclg.org/sdg-learning-modules>.

⁸⁰The global task force issued a joint statement following the (virtual) 2020 Local and Regional Governments' Day, available online at this link: <https://is.gd/CHWldk>. More details on the contents of the event are available at this link: <https://is.gd/oMqbMa>.

⁸¹For more information about UNACLA's history and mandate, see: <https://unhabitat.org/network/united-nations-advisory-committee-of-local-authorities-unaccla>.

⁸²Governing Council Resolution 17/18 of 1999 <https://mirror.unhabitat.org/content.asp?ID=778&catid=366&typeid=24>

INSIGHT BOX 2: UN-Habitat's approach to SDG localization

By adopting a territorial approach looking at sustainable development through multi-level, multi-sector and multi-stakeholder lenses, UN-Habitat has designed a strategy to support the localization of the SDGs connecting all components of the SDG implementation chain – from data to project implementation and monitoring.

In its effort to coordinate the development of a United Nations system-wide strategy on sustainable urban development, UN-Habitat has recently convened United Nations agencies and partners for the development of a **Global Urban Monitoring Framework (UMF)**, to be presented to the UN Statistical Commission for endorsement in March 2022. By harmonizing existing indices to monitor urban and local development, the UMF will provide a methodology to monitor the contribution of cities to the achievement of the SDGs, the implementation of the New Urban Agenda and the achievement of the urban dimensions of the other global agendas. The UMF is currently being finalized in consultation with a range of the United Nations institutions and partners.

The efforts linked to the UMF directly inform UN-Habitat's systematic support to VLRs. From the point of view of technical cooperation, UN-Habitat has advanced on this

strategic issue by adopting a fully-fledged methodology based on four pillars: i) data innovation; ii) participation and inclusion; iii) policy coherence and VNR connection; and iv) global advocacy. Since 2018, UN-Habitat has provided support to the cities of Rio de Janeiro and Niterói, in Brazil, and Trujillo and Chimbote in Peru, as the first examples of VLR support in Latin America. Since 2020, the agency has cooperated with Moscow (Russian Federation) and Florence (Italy), and recently with the Greater Amman Municipality (Jordan), Rabat (Morocco), Bhopal (India) and Madrid (Spain).

The last component of UN-Habitat's strategy is represented by the **SDG Cities Programme**,⁸³ a flagship initiative of UN-Habitat that builds on the data, narratives and priorities identified via the UMF and the VLRs in order to improve SDG implementation in cities through evidence-based planning; capacity-building in planning, governance, revenue and service delivery; and securing the financing for local SDG impact initiatives. Through the programme, UN-Habitat aims to positively impact a million lives in about 1,000 cities through a systematic approach that combines evidence-based policymaking, digitized tools, technical backstopping, and matchmaking finances with catalytic, impactful projects that advance the SDGs.

involvement in VNR processes, as well as in national coordination mechanisms for SDG implementation. The results of this work have been published and presented at the HLPF since 2017 with the report series 'Towards the Localization of the SDGs'.⁸⁴ UCLG also devoted the latest issue of its flagship publication, *The Global Report on Local Democracy and Decentralization (GOLD V)*, to the localization of the SDGs.⁸⁵ In 2018, the organization published a guide to support cities in the localization of the SDGs from a cultural perspective,⁸⁶ and indexed all related good practices according to the 17 SDGs.⁸⁷ In 2019, UCLG created a Community of Practice on VLRs and, in 2020, it launched the Voluntary Subnational Reviews (VSRs) initiative, led by the national LGAs (currently

in 14 countries). In this framework, the organization has developed four modules and supported peer-learning and training-of-trainers initiatives worldwide to incentivize and strengthen the role of horizontal cooperation and capacity-building at the global and regional levels.⁸⁸ Finally, in support of the localization of financing, UCLG – in partnership with UNCDF and the Global Fund for Cities Development (FMDV) – launched the International Municipal Investment Fund (IMIF). Similarly, UCLG Africa, the African section of UCLG, set up the African Territorial Agency (ATA) as a supporting platform for local and regional governments to access finance, mobilize public and private resources, and earmark them for sustainable urban projects.⁸⁹

⁸³For more information about SDG Cities, see: <https://unhabitat.org/programme/sustainable-development-goals-cities>.

⁸⁴UCLG and Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments, 'National and Sub-National Governments on the Way towards the Localization of the SDGs 2017'; UCLG and Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments, 'Towards the Localization of the SDGs 2018'; UCLG and Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments, 'Towards the Localization of the SDGs 2019'; UCLG and Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments, 'Towards the Localization of the SDGs 2020'.

⁸⁵UCLG, *The Localization of the Global Agendas*.

⁸⁶UCLG and UCLG Committee on Culture, 'Culture in the Sustainable Development Goals: A Guide for Local Action' (Barcelona: United Cities and Local Governments, 2018), <https://is.gd/9T1UsA>.

⁸⁷See the good practices database developed by the UCLG Culture Committee: <https://obs.agenda21culture.net/>.

⁸⁸More details on the activities of UCLG's Learning department available online: <https://www.learning.uclg.org/>.

⁸⁹For more information see: <https://www.uclg.org/en/issues/local-finances>. See also UNCDF, 'Meridian Named Fund Manager for International Municipal Investment Fund (IMIF)', 2019, <https://www.uncdf.org/article/5177/meridian-fund-manager-for-imif>. More information on the Africa Territorial Agency: <http://knowledge-uclg.org/agence-afrique-territoriale.html?lang=fr>. As of 2020, ten pilot municipalities from Africa, Latin America and Central Europe have been preselected for potential access to the IMIF, while 50 cities from 25 countries have shown their commitment and subscribed to the ATA.

4.2 UNDESA and the United Nations Regional Commissions: The added value of diversity and context

Within the United Nations system, UNDESA has, since the beginning of the SDG reviewing process, provided a sort of institutional bridge between its work to systematize national reviewing through the HLPF and the efforts of local and regional governments to join this movement as peers. In 2020, UNDESA inaugurated a series of capacity-building meetings with local and regional governments, local and national stakeholders and several members of the SDG-related global community to strengthen vertical collaboration and provide new opportunities of both policy and institutional peer learning across various levels of government. In October 2020, UNDESA published the 'Global Guiding Elements for Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) of SDG implementation'⁹⁰ a document which underscores the linkage between national and local reporting and recommends a common template for local reviews with a clear connection with the guidelines that UNDESA has been publishing for national reviews since the onset of the SDG era. Its work has also been an essential source of global and political legitimacy for the 'VLR cities'; local reviewing is still lacking, after all, a definite mandate or acknowledgement in the 2030 Agenda, and the institutional support provided by UNDESA has increasingly bridged this gap and raised the status of local reviews as an essential cog in the implementation and monitoring machinery.

The United Nations' Regional Economic Commissions have also been at the forefront of the mobilization process to engage local and regional governments in SDG localization as well as in monitoring and reporting,

especially via the Regional Forums on Sustainable Development and the lead they provide in the organization and functioning of the HLPF. The regional commissions play an intermediation role which is essential to link the implementation and reporting initiatives of national governments – i.e., the VNRs – with the experience, knowledge and information coming from the local level.

In October 2020, the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP), with the support of the partners of the Penang Platform for Sustainable Urbanization and the involvement of UN-Habitat, published the 'Asia-Pacific Regional Guidelines on Voluntary Local Reviews',⁹¹ designed to provide guidance to Asia-Pacific local governments that approach the 2030 Agenda. During the past three years, the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development (APFSD) served as a multi-level hub for dialogue and cooperation.⁹² UN-ESCAP has been using the forum – with the participation of Member States' officials and mayors of cities from all over the region – as a shared roundtable where local and national institutions can look for common answers to common problems. A few cities already presented their VLRs in dedicated events embedded in the forum's agenda, while VLRs have also been a topic of discussion in the sessions on national reviews. In line with its bridging role between national and local dimensions of reporting, UN-ESCAP has also expanded the scope of its rapid response facility, which provides technical assistance to Member States in the process of drafting their VNRs, in order to also support local governments interested in

⁹⁰UNDESA, 'Global Guiding Elements for Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) of SDG Implementation' (New York: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2020), https://sdgs.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-10/GlobalGuidingElementsforVLRs_FINAL.pdf.

⁹¹UN-ESCAP, 'Asia-Pacific Regional Guidelines on Voluntary Local Reviews' (Bangkok: United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2020), <https://is.gd/KiOgCg>. More information on UN-ESCAP's work on the 2030 Agenda is available online at: <https://www.unescap.org/2030-agenda>.

⁹²More information on UN-ESCAP regional dialogue initiatives: <https://www.unescap.org/2030-agenda/regional-processes-and-dialogue>.

producing their own VLR in those countries.

In March 2021, UNESCAP, together with UNDESA, organized a VNR-VLR Lab as an associate event of the 8th APFSD. The event brought together Member States' representatives as well as mayors and local government officials from the region to discuss the means to strengthen integration between VNRs and VLRs. Since 2019, UN-ESCAP, UN-Habitat and UCLG-ASPAC, in collaboration with the United Nations University, the Institute for the Advanced Study of Sustainability (UNU-IAS), the Association of Pacific Rim Universities (APRU) and Japan's IGES, have run the Asia-Pacific Mayors' Academy,⁹³ an institution that engages newly-elected city mayors and governors in capacity-building activities, introducing them and their communities to the SDGs. VLRs are now fully integrated in the academy's curriculum with a dedicated stand-alone module. UNESCAP is currently developing an e-learning tool to provide tailored guidance on the VLRs. The tool will also act as a platform for local and national stakeholders to engage and share experiences and lessons learnt from their VLR journey with their peers.

The African context has also experienced a growing interest in SDG localization and VLRs. The African Regional Forum on Sustainable Development (ARFSD),⁹⁴ organized by the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA),⁹⁵ has shown a strong commitment from the national level to increase the engagement of local government in the forum's scope and proceedings, as well as to strengthen their work on VLRs. The ARFSD has increasingly featured discussion and collaboration between national and local representatives. UNECA has been supporting several cities in the development of their VLRs⁹⁶ and promoted a stronger link with reporting at the national level. The VLR of Ngora District in Uganda, for instance, was included in

the country's VNR. Moreover, UNECA, in collaboration with UN-Habitat and UCLG Africa, has been fostering this collaborative framework through the development of the regional guidelines on VLRs (see Insight Box 1 in Section 2.1 above), whose draft was presented at the 2021 Regional Forum, in March 2021.

In the Arab region, the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (UNESCWA)⁹⁷ has acknowledged the regional challenging context and weak national-local structural linkages affecting policy coherence on sustainable urban development. Noting that the Arab region is one of the most urbanized regions in the world with numerous development challenges, the commission considers the VLRs as powerful tools to advance the localization of the SDGs and as drivers of innovation and a source of information that could change the approach to the national review. No VLR for an Arab city has been officially produced to date, however, even though in the Arab region cities are inevitably carrying a large part of the socio-economic burden affecting sustainable development. VLRs can expose the positive impact of local governments' initiatives on development and bring them to the centre of attention at the national and regional levels. VLRs can equally increase the awareness of national governments of the untapped potential of implementation and monitoring capacity that subnational (local) governments can provide. Accordingly, UNESCWA and UN-Habitat are currently supporting the Greater Amman Municipality (GAM) in close collaboration with the Ministry of Local Development and relevant stakeholders in developing its VLR. This support is also being extended to the city of Rabat, in Morocco. The VLR process in the region is expected to increase awareness of more local governments on the process and advocate for the VLRs as a policy-innovation tool. The results of these first

⁹³More information available online: <https://www.asiapacificmayorsacademy.org/>.

⁹⁴More details on the event – whose 7th Session convened in Brazzaville on March 1–4, 2021 – are available online: <https://www.uneca.org/arfsd2021>.

⁹⁵More information on the regional commission and its activities is available online: <https://www.uneca.org/>.

⁹⁶These include: Yaoundé, Accra, Victoria Falls, Harare and Ngora District.

⁹⁷More information on UN-ESCWA and its work in the region: <https://www.unescwa.org/>.

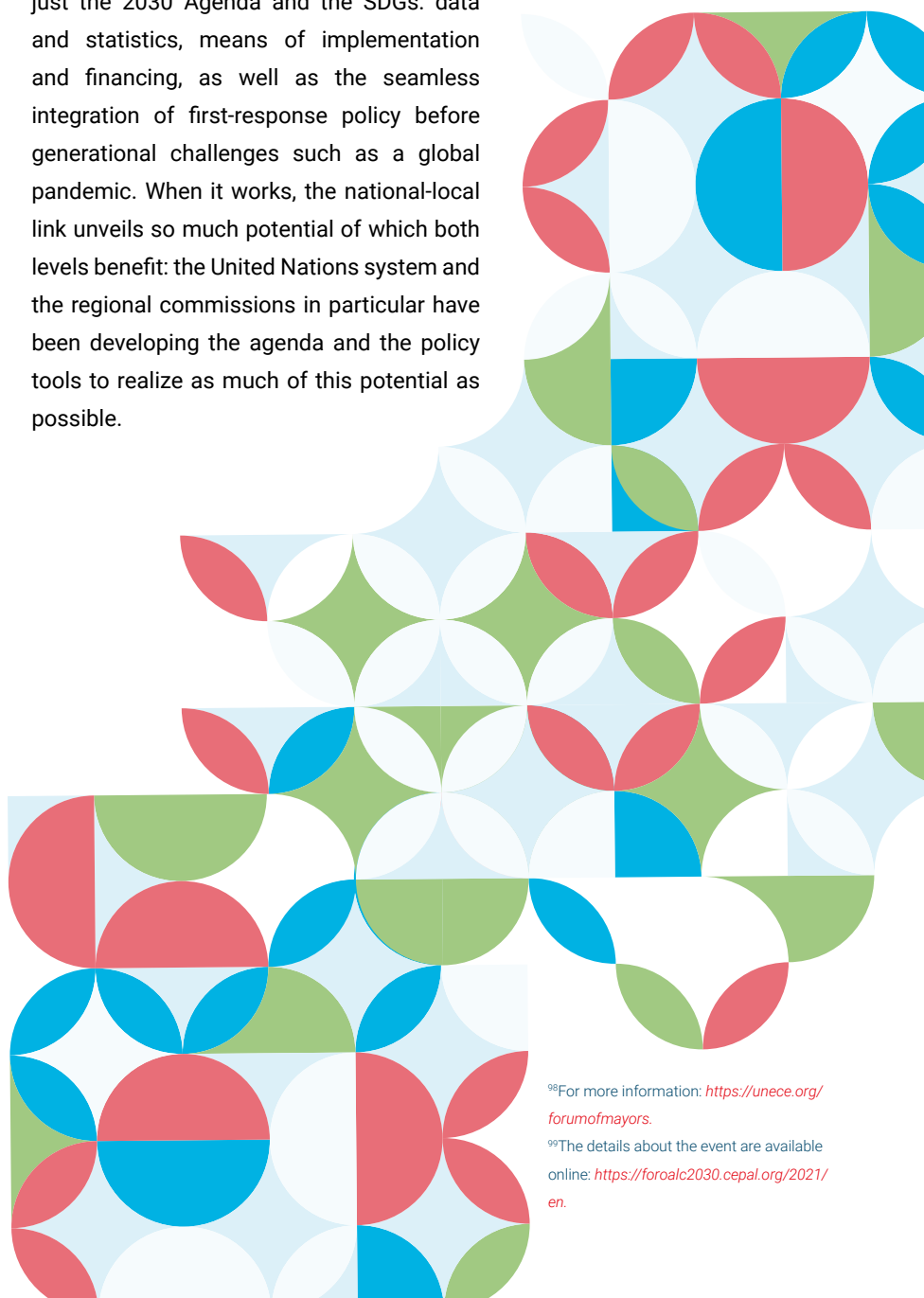
VLR experiences in the region are expected to inform regional guidelines, also to be developed in collaboration with UN-Habitat.

In the 'extended' European Region, Central Asia and Northern America, the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) has been developing an agenda that promotes cooperation between national and local governments. In October 2020, UNECE convened its first Forum of Mayors,⁹⁸ with the collaboration of several United Nations agencies and international networks of municipalities. In 2021, the event will be held back-to-back with the UNECE Regional Forum on Sustainable Development. The regional commission is also working on data and indicator capacity-building and, more generally, on the establishment of a pan-European alliance consistent with the 'whole-of-society' approaches that the SDGs seek to mainstream in national and local policy. In the context of the European Regional Forum for Sustainable Development, UNECE organized a pre-meeting entitled "Local Governments: The role of SDG Voluntary Local Reviews". UNECE is also working on its own 'Guidelines for the Development of Voluntary Local Reviews in the UNECE Region'.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, the ecosystem that UNECLAC has established in support of localization, monitoring and local engagement revolves around the Forum of the Countries of Latin America and the Caribbean on Sustainable Development,⁹⁹ a common platform for dialogue, mutual learning and technical assistance on the 2030 Agenda. Local governments have been progressively engaged in the Forum, and the 2021 session (March 15–21, 2021) included a regional workshop in which national governments presenting a VNR at the 2021 HLPF had an opportunity to sit with local governments that have already developed local reviews, or are working on new ones, in order to define, debate and improve multi-

level links and common resources.

Ultimately, the United Nations regional commissions are playing a critical role as convenors of the key actors in the arena of SDG implementation; they have been able to make national and local governments work together for the same purpose. At the same time, they participate in the development of knowledge, data, good practices and bottom-up initiatives that are produced and shared by local governments across the region. Effective dialogue and cooperation, also through the help of the regional commissions, can bring about the 'localization' of much more than just the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs: data and statistics, means of implementation and financing, as well as the seamless integration of first-response policy before generational challenges such as a global pandemic. When it works, the national-local link unveils so much potential of which both levels benefit: the United Nations system and the regional commissions in particular have been developing the agenda and the policy tools to realize as much of this potential as possible.



⁹⁸For more information: <https://unece.org/forumofmayors>.

⁹⁹The details about the event are available online: <https://foroalc2030.cepal.org/2021/en>.

4.3 The international community and global local government networks: Driving mobilization and ownership

Even outside the United Nations system, global local government networks and the international community have powerfully rallied in support of local governments' efforts to localize the SDGs, monitor progress and obstacles, and adapt both their strategic plans and actual policy-making to the SDGs.

Besides UCLG, several other global local government networks – e.g., the Assembly of European Regions,¹⁰⁰ C40,¹⁰¹ the Commonwealth Local Government Forum,¹⁰² the Global Covenant of Mayors,¹⁰³ ICLEI,¹⁰⁴ Regions4,¹⁰⁵ the Union of Ibero-American Capital Cities,¹⁰⁶ among many others – as well as UCLG's regional sections,¹⁰⁷ have worked tirelessly on advocacy campaigns, the establishment of local knowledge hubs and platforms, peer-to-peer learning and training, information exchanges and technical assistance to support VLRs and a whole range of localization-driven initiatives, often in alliance with civil society organizations. Global networks, ultimately, have been instrumental in the expansion of VLRs and VSRs. They also played a crucial role in expanding the participation of mayors and local governments' representatives in global and regional forums, as well as in various programmes organized by the United Nations and its regional commissions.¹⁰⁸ During the United Nations General Assembly in 2019, New York City launched the NYC Declaration on the Voluntary Local Review as a way for subnational governments to formally commit to sharing their progress towards the SDGs directly with the UN.¹⁰⁹ At the time of the launch, 22 subnational governments from every region in the world has signed on. The VLR Declaration now consists of over 222 signatories committed

to the localizing the goals. These local governments are working to fulfil the three commitments of the declaration: a) to map strategies and data to the SDGs, b) to provide a forum for stakeholders to engage using the framework of the SDGs, and c) to submit a VLR to the United Nations during the High-Level Political Forum. The NYC Mayor's Office for International Affairs has emphasized the importance of keeping the barrier of entry low as a way of ensuring a diverse range of local and regional governments in this movement. New York also continues to provide technical support to local governments and create thematic events to promote knowledge exchange.

The OECD has been supporting local governments in their SDG localization plans since it launched its ambitious Programme on a 'Territorial Approach to the SDGs' at the 2018 HLPF. The initiative builds on learning, sharing and monitoring pillars so as to promote horizontal peer-learning activities (with about a dozen pilot local governments involved) as well as shared tools to review implementation performance.¹¹⁰ The programme's data-based SDG implementation measurement tool aims to profile hundreds of municipalities and other sub-national authorities.

Since 2018, the European Commission's Joint Research Centre¹¹¹ has developed the URBAN2030 project¹¹² in collaboration with Directorate General REGIO and with support from UN-Habitat. The project aims at strengthening local government capacities for the achievement of the SDGs and providing global guidance and facilitation for the design and production of

¹⁰⁰More information: <https://aer.eu/>.

¹⁰¹See also: <https://www.c40.org>.

¹⁰²More details at: <https://www.clgf.org.uk/>.

¹⁰³More information: <https://www.globalcovenantofmayors.org/>.

¹⁰⁴See: <https://iclei.org/>.

¹⁰⁵More information: <https://www.regions4.org/our-work/sdgs>.

¹⁰⁶See also: <https://ciudadesiberoamericanas.org/>.

¹⁰⁷These include UCLG-ASPAC (Asia-Pacific), CEMR-CCRE (Council of European Municipalities and Regions), FLACMA (Latin American Federation of Cities, Municipalities and Municipal Associations), Metropolis (the global association of metropolitan areas), UCLG Africa, UCLG-Eurasia and UCLG-MEWA.

¹⁰⁸For a summary of these initiatives see "Towards the Localization of the SDGs" 4th Report 2020, particularly in section 3, "Local and regional government actions region-by-region" and "Actions of the global networks of local and regional governments", pp. 49-59.

¹⁰⁹The declaration is accessible online: <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/international/programs/voluntary-local-review-declaration.page>.

¹¹⁰OECD, A Territorial Approach to the Sustainable Development Goals, OECD Urban Policy Reviews (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1787/e86fa715-en>.

¹¹¹More information on the JRC, the European Commission's science and knowledge service, is available online at this address: <https://ec.europa.eu/info/departments/joint-research-centre-en>.

¹¹²All the information on the project is available online at this link: <https://urban.jrc.ec.europa.eu/sdgs/en/>.

VLRs. The URBAN2030 project does so by systematizing knowledge and information on global, regional, national and sub-national policies and practices, as well as providing a set of recommendations and tools for local governments to take full advantage of the information, data and capacity they have at their disposal. This knowledge and experiences are at the core of the 2020 'European Handbook on Voluntary Local Reviews',¹¹³ a guidance document which provides sub-national governments with an analysis of VLRs' state of the art and a set of original and adapted indicators and metrics to be used in local implementation assessments. The second edition of the handbook will be published in 2022. Several additional research products are now being added to URBAN2030's toolkit for local reviewing; among others, a comparative analysis on the use of indicators in European VLRs,¹¹⁴ an assessment of multi-level governance in SDG localization,¹¹⁵ and a publication on data and indicators that regions could potentially use to design their monitoring systems.¹¹⁶

The Brookings Institution has launched and manages the SDG Leadership City Network, a community of senior government officials from 17 cities across the world that are in the vanguard of pursuing local achievement of the SDGs, to exchange successes, challenges and best practices. To accelerate the dissemination of lessons learned from local government officials, Brookings also launched a 'City Playbook for Advancing the SDGs',¹¹⁷ made of "how-to" briefs authored by experienced city government leaders,

capturing their experiences in a format meant to be useful for government leaders in other cities who are interested in adopting the SDGs and applying these innovations and ideas in their local context.

IGES, besides actively supporting the drafting of the four Japanese VLRs, has acknowledged the global dimension of the VLR phenomenon and has established a VLR Lab to assess progress in then-available VLRs – its comprehensive atlas, 'State of the Voluntary Local Reviews 2020',¹¹⁸ came out in April 2020 – and create a knowledge hub on local reviewing efforts.

The support of the international community and the growing perception of local and regional governments as legitimate stakeholders in the global process of implementation and monitoring has greatly empowered the local level since the beginning of the SDG era. These institutions provided unique spaces of political and strategic opportunity for diverse and complex cities to come together and identify common solutions to shared problems; the impact of this kind of legitimization can be powerful in overcoming the perceived distance between a policy framework of global resonance and the day-to-day administration of local communities. By establishing a stronghold for a localized SDG culture and mindset, this enabling environment has helped create a snowball effect that is engaging more and more local governments – with their unique visions and approaches – in the implementation of the SDGs.

¹¹³Siragusa et al., 'European Handbook for SDG Voluntary Local Reviews'.

¹¹⁴Andrea Ciambra, 'European SDG Voluntary Local Reviews: A Comparative Analysis of Local Indicators and Data', ed. Alice Siragusa and Paola Proietti (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.2760/9692>.

¹¹⁵Andoni Hidalgo Simón, 'SDG Localisation and Multi-Level Governance: Lessons from the Basque Country', ed. Alice Siragusa and Paola Proietti (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, forthcoming, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.2760/20519>.

¹¹⁶Ainhua Gea Aranoa, 'Regional Indicators for the Sustainable Development Goals. An Analysis Based on the Cases of the Basque Country, Navarre and Flanders', ed. Alice Siragusa and Paola Proietti (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, forthcoming, 2021).

¹¹⁷The report is available online at this link: <https://is.gd/bRezki>.

¹¹⁸Fernando Ortiz-Moya et al., 'State of the Voluntary Local Reviews 2020: Local Action for Global Impact in Achieving the SDGs', IGES Working Papers (Kanagawa: Institute for Global Environmental Strategies, 2020).

4.4 National LGAs: Brokers of knowledge and national-local partnerships

Another crucial element of the political nebula which is surrounding the VLR movement is the community of national local government associations (LGAs). National LGAs often play a substantial role in the mobilization of their members and their engagement in the localization process. They have been supportive of national governments' efforts for interinstitutional dialogue and catalysts of horizontal cooperation among municipalities. Their role has often mirrored, at the local scale, that of global local government networks and organizations; they have been able to create 'enabling environments' across their constituency, either providing sub-national governments with technical support or providing a knowledge hub or a platform for mutual exchange and collaboration. National LGAs such as the Netherlands' Association of Dutch Municipalities (*Vereniging van Nederlandse Gemeenten*, VNG),¹¹⁹ the South African Local Government Association (SALGA),¹²⁰ the League of Cities of the Philippines,¹²¹ Brazil's National Confederation of Municipalities (CNM, *Confederação Nacional de Municípios*),¹²² the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM),¹²³ or the Association of Flemish Cities and Municipalities (*Vereniging van Vlaamse Steden en Gemeenten*),¹²⁴ to mention a few, have built a reputation as drivers of SDG localization and of membership empowerment, working as a substantial link between local action and the fulfilment of the global commitment, as well as supporting international cooperation.

The connection between an LGA's work on localization and the promotion of VLR participation is not necessarily straightforward and depends on several

contextual variables. The Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities (*Kuntaliitto*)¹²⁵ was seamlessly integrated in a process that, since the earliest stages, six Finnish cities and the Prime Minister's Office had helped design as the outcome of multi-level cooperation.¹²⁶ Similar experiences are being developed in the rest of Northern Europe. The Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities (*Kommunenes Sentralforbund*, KS) and the Sweden Association of Local and Regional Governments (SALAR) have been key in the promotion of a localization movement within their countries and emerged as leaders of more bottom-up mobilization. Both LGAs are currently developing Voluntary Sub-National Reports to collect information from subnational stakeholders, opening new channels of communication between the local governments working on their VLRS and the national institutions in charge of the VNRs for the 2021 HLPF.

More specifically, in Norway, KS has also been advocating for a change in the approach with which the national and local levels are defining their cooperation on localization and review. They have been active in signalling existing bottlenecks and siloes that are preventing national government departments and subnational governments to work more holistically and synergically. The first results are already visible; a new national coordination unit for the SDGs is being established within the Ministry for Local Governments and Modernization (*Kommunal- og moderniseringsdepartementet*, KMD) and the first national SDG Action Plan is to be ready by May 2021. All the while, KS has provided technical and policy assistance to

¹¹⁹ See also: <https://www.vng-international.nl/sustainable-development-goals>.

¹²⁰ For more information: <https://www.salga.org.za/>.

¹²¹ See: <https://lcp.org.ph/>.

¹²² For more details: <https://ods.cnm.org.br/mandala-municipal>.

¹²³ More information at: <https://fcm.ca/en>.

¹²⁴ More details available online at: <https://www.vvsg.be/>.

¹²⁵ More information available on the association's website: <https://www.localfinland.fi/>.

¹²⁶ The author and the editors held a series of interviews with representatives of several Finnish municipalities in December 2020–January 2021

the cities and regions that have triggered and fed this movement, acting as a de facto intermediary between the two levels of governance. At least three municipalities and three regions in Norway are currently working on their VLRs. Local governments across the country have established an informal 'network of excellence' for SDG transition, which brokers information on good practices of localization, reporting methods and local progress in implementation. This information is being used in conversations with the national governments and KS sits on the network's board. Finally, localization and reporting will be part of the agenda at the 2021 "Local Government Summit" organized by KS.

Besides their essential role as enablers and buffers between different spheres of governance, national LGAs have been able to actually *lead* the mobilization of their membership since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda. National LGAs in all continents have

been catalysts for the adaptation of the SDG framework to local needs and demands, as well as incubators of local initiatives. As explored in the UCLG's reporting series for the HLPF during the past four years, even in less enabling institutional contexts and with scarce resources and political leeway, LGAs have been looking for ways to lead implementation and mobilize sub-national governments. Mali's LGA (Association of Malian Municipalities, AMM) has been supporting 100 municipalities for local implementation by 2021 via European Union funding. Cape Verde's LGA (National Association of Municipalities of Cape Verde, ANMCV) has partnered with UNDP to improve localization initiatives in nine municipalities. South Africa's SALGA has built on long-standing ties with global United Nations agencies and other international organizations to further its awareness-raising work and to link it to data collection and management and monitoring capacity-

INSIGHT BOX 3: LOCAL2030 COALITION

As we speak, Local 2030 is being revamped and strengthened as a global coalition to advance the localization of the SDGs within the Decade of Action.

The Local2030 Coalition is a platform for the convergence of networks of local and regional governments and their associations, national governments, businesses, community-based organizations and other local actors, and the United Nations system. It seeks to foster collaboration, incubate innovation, share solutions and implement strategies that advance the SDGs, leveraging on rapid urbanization processes happening around the globe to accelerate the achievement of the SDGs. Local2030 aims to strengthen efforts by United Nations entities and the resident coordinator system to apply their respective mandates and advance SDG targets in cities and in partnership with local and regional ac-

tors and offer significant support to local and regional governments.

As part of the efforts of the United Nations Sustainable Development Group in the Decade of Action, the Local2030 Coalition will advance local SDG implementation by leveraging existing initiatives, alliances and solutions, and strengthening advocacy for bottom-up SDG action. It will support local actors in fully embracing the SDGs and systematically monitoring and reporting on them – including through VLRs and VNRs.

Coordinated and co-chaired by UN-Habitat, Local2030 will count on the close involvement of United Nations sister institutions and key stakeholders, such as UCLG/GTF, in both its governance structure and in the implementation of its activities and mandate.



building. Two LGAs in the Philippines engaged with over 30 municipalities in local projects for the implementation of the global agendas. In Georgia, the national LGA (National Association of Local Authorities of Georgia, NALAG) has been working on a set of indicators designed to fit local authorities' capacities and data.¹²⁷

Even more importantly, several LGAs have also taken the lead in the coordination of local monitoring efforts. As mentioned throughout the report, LGAs in several regions have taken on Voluntary Subnational Reviews, or VSRs, with the support of UCLG. In 2020, Benin, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Kenya, Mozambique and Nepal have been the trailblazers of this kind of review. By engaging with the LGAs' membership, VSRs are developing a comprehensive analysis of the progress and set-backs made by sub-national governments. The information of the VSRs has been an impactful source of data for several VNRs, and nine more VSRs have been elaborated in 2021: Cape Verde, Germany, Indonesia, Mexico, Norway,

Sweden, Tunisia and Zimbabwe. Zimbabwe. Ecuador is presenting its own second VSR.

Finally, it is worth noting that — since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda and the mainstreaming of the SDGs across all dimensions of policy — the new sustainable development paradigm has also successfully trickled down to community level. This includes NGOs, universities, health institutions, the cultural and arts establishments and, of course, some private sector entities, with many large, medium and small enterprises either adopting or at least approaching the SDGs within the framework of their social responsibility and sustainability schemes and initiatives.¹²⁸ It is important to acknowledge that the advances, alliance-building and commitment that are being developed at the community level of SDG implementation are essential building blocks in the paradigm shift that the 2030 Agenda is evoking and all the more important before the challenges of the Decade of Action.

¹²⁷The archive of UCLG's HLPF reports on SDG localization is accessible online at this link: <https://gold.uclg.org/report/localizing-sdgs-boost-monitoring-reporting>

¹²⁸See also: <https://www.unglobalcompact.org/>.

5 Conclusions and recommendations: towards a new generation of VLRs

Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) are facing a promising future. Since their first appearance in 2016, at the onset of the SDG era, and their widespread establishment as a valuable tool for local governments reporting on the localization of the SDGs in 2018, when New York City and the three Japanese municipalities of Kitakyushu, Toyama and Shimokawa officially presented their VLRs to the international community, a considerable number of new VLRs is being published every year. 'Clusters' of reviews within certain national or regional contexts are now also catalysing participation and creating small but meaningful snowball effects, with more and more local governments committing to implement, review and share the work and progress that their communities and territories are making in the achievement of the 2030 Agenda. In the meantime, local governments, their national associations and civil society organizations are also experimenting with new ways to report on the SDGs from the bottom-up; Voluntary Subnational Reviews, for instance, are gaining traction in several countries all over the world. All these experiences are now a relevant source of first-hand information for national governments and their Voluntary National Reviews. VLRs and local reporting in general are opening up new channels of both institutional and less formalized communication between different levels of government. VLRs – and their increasingly effective link with VNRs and national reporting strategies – are rapidly becoming a means for enhanced multilevel governance.

The international community has been strongly supportive of local and national reviewing and has come together to create a truly enabling environment for mutual learning and support. VLRs have become policy innovation tools for global cities such as Cape Town, Guangzhou, Los Angeles, Moscow or São Paulo, as well as for small, committed communities such as Canterbury, Niort or Shimokawa. In order to fully benefit from these experiences, however, VLRs should be consistently integrated with national efforts to review SDG localization, the frameworks in which national governments are designing their sustainability strategies, and a truly 'whole-of-government' approach in which both local and national stakeholders are empowered to work together and for a common goal.

For these reasons, volume two of the guidelines explores in detail the relationship between local and national reviewing processes, VLRs and VNRs, as well as the institutions, the mechanisms and the enabling environments that make these reviews possible. It looks at multi-level ecosystems that are promoting dialogue in various countries and regions. It searches for compatibility and mutual support in the way VNRs, VLRs and VSRs are written. The editorial team spoke to national and local representatives, officials and researchers to find out how they approached hundreds of policy initiatives at all levels, the complexities of data collection and analysis, and the processes that led institutions, organizations and so many residents to mobilize, participate and co-own the localization process. VNRs and VLRs do reveal invaluable information about all these things and more. They are a testament to the way national and subnational governments are committing to the 2030 Agenda, the SDGs and are an innovative way of imagining a sustainable future together.

A few recommendations can be shared on the shape that the next generation of VLRs could take, especially in the context of the Decade of Action:

- **VLRs are powerful tools to advance the localization of the SDGs.** The experience of the past few years has shown how VLRs have stimulated and driven local action to implement the SDGs. The VLR process strengthens coordination, accountability, transparency, cooperation (horizontal and vertical), participation and awareness of the SDGs, significantly boosting local efforts to solve urgent local issues, create partnerships and advance their path towards more equity and sustainability.
- **VLRs are drivers of innovation.** No standardized review process exists and implementation is not enforced by any agency. VLRs are an innovation by and for cities and regional governments so as to make progress on their local agendas, priorities and strategic visions. Cities, local governments and local actors are pushing the boundaries of their VLRs to maximize their potential as a basis for societal change and new policy applications.
- **The local-national dynamic is changing, thanks to VNR-VLR linkages.** The VLR movement and the pro-activeness of leading cities and territories have increased the demand for institutional intermediation between the local and national level. Several countries have established inter-institutional and cross-level mechanisms (committees and high-level commissions, as well as less institutionalized and more bottom-up venues) that work as new high-legitimacy spaces for different levels of government to work together, exchange data, practices and techniques on the way to the implementation of the SDGs. More focus on the tangible benefits of VNR-VLR alignment could work as incentives for even more collaboration, especially in federal systems or other multi-level arrangements in which sub-national and local autonomy is relevant or expanding.
- **The emergence of VLRs and the information they provide are changing the approach to the national review.** National governments are increasingly aware of the relevance of VLRs and committing to use the information and analysis they provide. Many governments already mention or include these data and insights in their national reviews. This process can happen in different ways and with different degrees of integration; VLRs could be attached to VNRs, mentioned in focus boxes or, in some cases, the information from VLRs could directly feed into the development of the VNR itself. Significant cooperation is happening at the level of SDG indicators, with national statistics offices collaborating directly with cities to incorporate and disaggregate locally-derived data.

Based on these premises, and as a way ahead for the next generation of VLRs, these guidelines propose four key dimensions through which VLRs can be strengthened and their relation to national SDG frameworks and VNR reinforced.

1) Promote national enabling environments for subnational reporting

Progress towards the achievement of the SDGs can only be attained through strengthened collaboration between all levels of government and the involvement of all components of civil society. Since the SDGs were adopted in 2015, the whole-of-government and whole-of society

approaches have been at the core of the 2030 Agenda. Accordingly, robust and co-produced national SDG localization strategies are **critical to catalyse the localization process**. In this regard, the guidelines recommend to:

- **Consider localization as a substantive dimension in the national strategies for sustainable development** so as to accelerate SDG implementation during the Decade of Action and foster synergies between national urban and territorial policies.
- **Promote the mainstreaming of the SDGs** into national and local planning as well as in all activities of national and local administrations, including monitoring processes.
- **Develop a multi-level collaborative culture of governance based on *whole-of-government* and *whole-of society* approaches** to encourage the involvement of local institutions and communities, as well as local ownership of the SDGs and their implementation through vertical and horizontal cooperation.
- **Strengthen multi-level policy coherence** between national and local development plans and strategies to ensure mutually beneficial alignment and efficiency, so that the national empowers the local and vice versa.
- **Design balanced, well-funded, SDG-aligned policies at the national level** to catalyse further participation from the bottom-up.

2) Enhance the VLR-VNR connection

National governments, which since 2015 have been engaged in what was originally designed as a purely intergovernmental process, are today increasingly aware of how impactful local action and commitment can be for the achievement of the SDGs. VLRs have brought about a different approach to reviewing, one that fosters local ownership and accountability. Strong VNR-VLR linkages can overcome institutional bottlenecks while also helping pool local information and implementation knowledge together. National governments have become more and more involved in these developments and can encourage bottom-up approaches even more. At this stage, it is important to:

- **Identify how VLRs and VNRs can add value to one another**, increasing the opportunities for local authorities and stakeholders to co-own the national reporting process, and vice versa.
- **Include local and regional governments in the national SDG reporting and follow-up processes**, which means also inviting local governments to participate as peers in VNRs, SDG-related planning and its actual implementation.
- **Ensure that local governments' voices and experiences are adequately reported in VNRs**, paying special attention to VLRs, VSRs and the other local reporting tools and venues with dedicated focus.
- **Make sure VLRs are an opportunity to review and strengthen policy coherence**, providing insights on vertical alignment with national plans, as well as horizontal consistency between existing local development plans, strategies or policies.

- **Mobilize adequate support and resources to strengthen local reporting capacities**, particularly in the case of local governments with limited human, financial and technical resources to ensure that no one and no place is left behind.
- **Facilitate collaborative and multi-level data environments** by improving data collection, management and analysis at the city and territorial levels, especially through disaggregated data, while strengthening collaboration with national statistics offices.

3) Strengthen Voluntary Local Reviews and support their systematization

VLRs have grown into a tool of policy innovation and strategic planning that, from the perspective of the 2030 Agenda and the global goals of sustainable development, have begun to mobilize the local level and bring the needs, demands and expectations of local and regional governments into the national policy debate. They have become a catalyst for the participation of civil society, grassroots associations, academia, cultural organizations, economically-relevant stakeholders and local leaders. They have also increased local ownership and the institutionalization of the SDGs across different spheres of government. Strengthening local reporting capacities and closing the data gap will require additional efforts and support in the near future, and should build on the following recommendations:

- **Create local mechanisms for structural and periodic long-term reporting** by enhancing the collaboration between local governments' departments and agencies, as well as inter-municipal cooperation.
- **Promote inclusive participation and include residents and local stakeholders in the VLR process systematically.** This is essential to give marginalized groups and communities a voice in the SDG localization process, thus **leaving no one behind** while also strengthening the social contract through more transparency and accountability.
- **Strengthen data environments at the local level to collect new, better and disaggregated data**, promoting the collection of non-traditional and qualitative information and the use of a common global approach – the Global Urban Monitoring Framework.
- **Support the crowdsourcing of new ideas on local monitoring and indicators**, which can be more tailored on the local reality of local contexts.
- **Support local government associations' capacities to contribute to and assist with VSR reports**, in order to involve larger groups of local governments within the same national context and to improve the enabling environment for even more VLRs to be published.
- **Support the emergence and adoption of diverse reporting tools, methods and practices** that are more tailored to the differences in context and capacities at the local level and between local governments.
- **Keep promoting a regional perspective on VLRs** and their connection with the VNR, specifically looking at the potential for the sharing of experiences, good practices and mutual learning between cities.



4) Create an international environment to support subnational reporting

An increasing number of countries and local governments are devoting efforts to support bottom-up reviews of the state of SDG implementation in their territories. Their number and 'critical mass', however, are still limited. It is all the more important that the 'enabling environment' for VLRs that the international community has established keeps growing around the municipalities, regions and other sub-national governments that actively form and contribute to the VLR community and those that resolve to join it. It is essential to:

- **Continue building and consolidating strategic partnerships** between the international institutions that have contributed to the emergence of VLRs in order to ensure that their support remains consistent and efficient.
- **Strengthen cooperation between United Nations agencies and institutions** to improve joint technical support to local governments and facilitate the link between the local, national, regional and global levels of action.
- **Further strengthen local governments' participation in the Regional Forums on Sustainable Development** and in regional reports on SDGs, devoting specific attention to VLRs and VSRs.
- **Support the participation of local governments in the national delegations that join SDG-related regional and international fora** and, in particular, the HLPF.
- **Continue developing and disseminating VLR guidelines**, toolkits and knowledge platforms to translate the requirements and expectations of the 2030 Agenda into the working language of public administrations and support innovative policy thinking at municipal and territorial level.
- **Support local government associations, city-to-city cooperation and peer learning for SDG monitoring and reviewing**; it is key to develop training initiatives, peer-to-peer reviewing, communities of practice, among others, in order to facilitate the diffusion of local reporting methods and practices.
- **Develop global, regional and national campaigns to encourage local reporting efforts in cities and territories** as a means to raise awareness, catalyse advocacy and systematically improve the localization of the SDGs through stronger cooperation among national and local governments and their networks, as well as supportive and engaged international institutions.

As the Decade of Action begins, a new generation of VLRs is emerging, shaped by the increasing centrality, responsibility and co-ownership of local and regional governments in the SDG localization process. These VLRs build on the added value of multi-level synergies and they sustain the transformative and innovative action of national sustainable development policies and support with local commitment the SDG implementation process of national governments. VLRs, in other words, illustrate the potential of a sustainable future in which the local, national and global levels are inextricably connected and work together for the accelerated implementation of the 2030 Agenda and achievement of the SDGs.

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7 Annexes

List of local governments that have published a VLR or similar document

Local Government	Type	Year	Region	Population
Barcelona	Municipal	2018	Latin America and the Caribbean	121,190
Barcelona	Municipal	2019, 2020	Europe	1,620,343
Basque Country	Regional	2017	Europe	2,189,534
Besançon	Municipal	2018, 2019	Europe	115,934
Bhopal	Municipal	2021	Asia-Pacific	1,798,218
Bonn	Municipal	2020	Europe	329,673
Bristol	Municipal	2019	Europe	463,400
Buenos Aires	Municipal	2019, 2020	Latin America and the Caribbean	2,891,082
Busia	Regional	2019	Africa	893,681
Canterbury	Municipal	2019	Europe	55,240
Cape Town	Municipal	2019	Africa	3,776,000
Cauayan City	Municipal	2017	Asia-Pacific	129,523
Chimbote	Municipal	2020	Latin America and the Caribbean	365,534
Ciudad Valles	Municipal	2020	Latin America and the Caribbean	176,935
Deqing	Regional	2017	Asia-Pacific	428,000
Espoo	Municipal	2020	Europe	291,439
Florence	Municipal	2021	Europe	383,083
Ghent	Municipal	2020	Europe	260,341
Gothenburg	Municipal	2019	Europe	579,281
Guangzhou	Municipal	2020	Asia-Pacific	12,108,533
Hamamatsu	Municipal	2019	Asia-Pacific	791,707
Hawaii	Regional	2020	North America	1,415,872
Helsinki	Municipal	2019, 2021	Europe	650,058
Jaén	Provincial	2020	Europe	638,099
Kitakyushu	Municipal	2018	Asia-Pacific	940,978
Kwale	Regional	2019	Africa	866,820
La Paz	Municipal	2018	Latin America and the Caribbean	757,184
Liverpool	Municipal	2020	Europe	864,122

List of local governments that have published a VLR or similar document

Local Government	Type	Year	Region	Population
Los Angeles	Municipal	2019	North America	3,990,456
Málaga	Municipal	2018	Europe	571,026
Mannheim	Municipal	2019	Europe	309,370
Marsabit	Regional	2019	Africa	459,785
Mexico City	Municipal	2017, 2021	Latin America and the Caribbean	8,918,653
Montevideo	Municipal	2020	Latin America and the Caribbean	1,719,453
New Taipei	Municipal	2019	Asia-Pacific	4,014,560
New York	Municipal	2018, 2019	North America	8,398,748
Niort	Municipal	2020	Europe	58,707
Niterói	Municipal	2020	Latin America and the Caribbean	496,696
NR-Westphalia	Regional	2016	Europe	17,912,134
Oaxaca	Regional	2019	Latin America and the Caribbean	3,967,889
Pará	Regional	2020	Latin America and the Caribbean	7,581,051
Pittsburgh	Municipal	2020	North America	305,704
Rio de Janeiro	Municipal	2020	Latin America and the Caribbean	6,718,903
Santa Fe	Regional	2019	Latin America and the Caribbean	3,194,537
Santana de Parnaíba	Municipal	2019	Latin America and the Caribbean	126,574
São Paulo	Municipal	2020	Latin America and the Caribbean	12,176,866
São Paulo	Regional	2019	Latin America and the Caribbean	45,538,936
Scotland	Regional	2020	Europe	5,463,300
Shimokawa	Municipal	2018	Asia-Pacific	3,836
Stuttgart	Municipal	2020	Europe	635,911
Suwon	Municipal	2018	Asia-Pacific	1,241,311
Taipei	Municipal	2019, 2020	Asia-Pacific	2,635,286
Taita Taveta	Regional	2019	Africa	381,210
Toyama	Municipal	2018	Asia-Pacific	415,884

List of local governments that have published a VLR or similar document

Local Government	Type	Year	Region	Population
Trujillo	Municipal	2020	Latin America and the Caribbean	919,899
Turku	Municipal	2020	Europe	193,089
Valencian Country	Regional	2016	Europe	5,003,769
Wallonia	Regional	2017	Europe	3,633,795
Winnipeg	Municipal	2018, 2020	North America	705,244
Yucatan	Regional	2020	Latin America and the Caribbean	2,097,175

List of local governments that are currently in the process of drafting a VLR

Local Government	Type	Year	Region	Population
Accra	Municipal	2021	Africa	4,200,000
Amman	Municipal	2021	Middle East and Western Asia	4,302,730
Bugiri	Provincial	2021	Africa	426,800
Durango	Regional	2021	Latin America and the Caribbean	1,832,650
Guadalajara	Municipal	2021	Latin America and the Caribbean	1,460,148
Harare	Municipal	2021	Africa	2,123,132
Helsingborg	Municipal	2021	Europe	109,869
Izmir	Municipal	2021	Europe	4,367,251
Kitagwenda	Municipal	2021	Asia-Pacific	1,790,000
Kuala Lumpur	Provincial	2021	Africa	165,354
Kyotera	Provincial	2021	Africa	599,817
Malmö	Municipal	2021	Europe	316,588
Mérida	Municipal	2021	Latin America and the Caribbean	892,363
Moscow	Municipal	2021	Eurasia	12,506,468
Naga	Municipal	2021	Asia-Pacific	196,003
Nakhon Si Thammarat	Municipal	2021	Asia-Pacific	102,152
Nebbi	Provincial	2021	Africa	157,400
Ngora District	Municipal	2021	Asia-Pacific	725,070
Rabat	Municipal	2021	Africa	577827

List of local governments that are currently in the process of drafting a VLR

Local Government	Type	Year	Region	Population
Shah Alam	Municipal	2021	Asia-Pacific	740,750
Sheema	Provincial	2021	Africa	207,343
Singra	Municipal	2021	Asia-Pacific	289,952
Sironko	Provincial	2021	Africa	239,600
State of Mexico	Regional	2021	Latin America and the Caribbean	16,992,418
Stockholm	Municipal	2021	Europe	975,551
Subang Jaya	Municipal	2021	Asia-Pacific	725,070
Sultanbeyli	Sub-Municipal	2021	Europe	302,388
Surabaya	Municipal	2021	Asia-Pacific	2,874,314
Tabasco	Regional	2021	Latin America and the Caribbean	2,402,598
Tampere	Municipal	2021	Europe	241,391
Yaoundé	Municipal	2021	Africa	2,765,600
Uppsala	Municipal	2021	Europe	177,074
Vantaa	Municipal	2021	Europe	237,231
Victoria Falls	Municipal	2021	Africa	109,660
Bogotá	Municipal	2022	Latin America and the Caribbean	7,412,566
Bucaramanga	Municipal	2022	Latin America and the Caribbean	516,512
Manizales	Municipal	2022	Latin America and the Caribbean	434,403
Medellín	Municipal	2022	Latin America and the Caribbean	2,569,007
Oulu	Municipal	2022	Europe	207,424

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Cover picture:

Bhar Sudip (sudipbhar5b@gmail.com)
Gaya Railway Station at Bihar in India

A train compartment which was already overcrowded but still passengers were trying to get in the train from the other side of the platform. It's a daily and very common practice in Bihar State in India. Lack of protection and security in every step in the journey can be seen.

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